

BORRASCA

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN has set this splendid novel, a departure from his usual genre, against a picture of Virginia City, Nevada, on the famous Comstock Lode, during the bonanza period 1859-1878. It was a city of numbered days, but those days were blazoned in silver and gold.

And it was here in the savage world of the Comstock Lode that Malcolm Douglas was determined to find bonanza, and to prove the miners' maxim, "As many days as you are in borrasca, just that many days shall you be in bonanza."

Borrasca—failure. The word applied to a good part of Malcolm's previous life. But when he arrived in Virginia City, he began his fight for the things he wanted—wealth, success and Althea, so impulsive, so spontaneous, so feminine.

In his way stood his boyhood friend, Logan Berkeley. Malcolm had resented for years the calm confidence of this aristocratic southerner. Their long friendship as boys and then as comrades-in-arms in the War between the States could not suppress Malcolm's jealousy. No scheme was too daring, no fight too bloody for Malcolm as he took his bitter stand against the man who had always had the things in life he felt should also be his. Even the shock of the historic fire which played havoc with the city was not too brutal for him to turn it to his own advantage and prove to Logan that he, too, could be lord of the universe.

Mr. Cohen, a veteran craftsman known to many readers for his mysteries, has injected into this novel all the conflicting emotions of greed and revenge to give us a brilliant portrait of a man who gambles all he has win or lose. But at the same time he has portrayed in BORRASCA an authentic picture of one of the most exciting chapters in America's History.

BORRASCA

By

Octavius Roy Cohen



London

ARTHUR BARKER, LIMITED

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, LONDON AND EDINBURGH

To
Eugene and Viña Delmar

BORRAÇA.

I

1868

AT THE TOP of the pass the road widened. The driver of the lead wagon pulled over to the side and stopped. The other wagons in the train did the same thing so that there was now silence where before there had been the creaking of heavy wheels on the hard, rutty road; the shouting of drivers, the ceaseless tinkling of the tiny silver bells which adorned the harness of all the mules.

From this bleak, unshaded eminence, they looked down upon a grim and barren country, a series of canyons and ravines between stark and forbidding mountains. They gazed upon a land where there was no vegetation save sparse, dust covered sage which clung desperately to the unfertile soil. They were looking upon the harshest and most lightening land in all the West, a land where there was no water, where nothing grew and animals could not live, where today there was brilliant, blinding sunshine and in winter there was bitter, blinding snow.

They were looking down upon the ugliest land in the world, and the richest. They were looking at the grim rock and choking dust which blinketed the Comstock Lode. They were gazing at a fabulous bit of ground, scarcely more than two miles in length, beneath the surface of which there lay more than four hundred million dollars' worth of silver and gold.

A short distance ahead, and to the right of the road, Mount Davidson reached into the cloudless sky, dominating the landscape. Fifteen hundred feet below its topmost point, the city began, spreading and sprawling downward and northward and southward, a city of

fantasy and of harsh reality, a city which was not yet nine years old and which already had a population of more than twenty thousand, a city which had risen from barren rock and utter desolation and which produced nothing except incalculable wealth.

Virginia City, Nevada: heart of the Comstock Lode; Virginia City, which recognized no laws save those of its own making and worshiped no God except success; Virginia City, where patpers became millionaires overnight, and where, with equal facility, millionaires were reduced to poverty.

Scattered about the precipitous slope of Mount Davidson were buildings: handsome homes of brick and stone and wood, flimsy shacks, flimsier lean-to's. A straight line running north and south marked the principal street of this incredible place. Below the main traffic artery could be seen the stacks of the mills and hoisting plants, the low sloping roofs of the mine buildings and the dumps adjoining each of the shafts. And now, as the newcomers listened in the thin clear air of that great altitude, they heard faintly the beat of the city's heart: the continuous throb of the stamps in the great mills as they pounded the silver- and gold-bearing quartz to powder; the shrill cacophony of the mine whistles, each in a different key; the frequent jolting blasts from the underground stopes.

From their high vantage point the travelers could see the gaunt hoists, and even they could not differentiate one from another; they knew the names of many because already those names had become legend: the Kentuck, the Best & Belcher, the Crown Point, the Ophir where the original bonanza had been struck, the Chollar-Potosi, the Yellow Jacket, the Mexican, the Gould & Curry, the Savage. The mines did not ring the city, but cut straight through it and under it as though to serve warning that here there was no concession to softness or gentleness or beauty, that here was a city which had neither time nor thought for the more gracious aspects of life.

South of Virginia City could be seen the harsh eminence which was called the Divide and which made it impossible for them to see Gold Hill, second only in size and wealth and importance to Virginia City. Zigzagging eastward, gnawing through the mountains, were Gold Canyon and Six-Mile Canyon, and still farther off, and thousands of feet down, they could see in the crystal clarity of the August afternoon the flat stretches which marked the formidable Forty-Mile Desert and its grim sister the Twenty-six Mile Desert. Somewhere in those barren areas was the Humboldt Sink, where a river, wearied by its hopeless fight against nature, sinks miserably into the parched ground and disappears.

This was the Washoe: the Washoe mountains and the Washoe

valleys. This was the spot at which—ten, twelve, fifteen years previously—prospectors had camped on their way to the California gold fields beyond the Sierras. With their eyes on the snow-capped mountains ahead, and their hearts hot with tales of California gold, they had paused on the barren patch of ground which was later to become Virginia City only long enough to recover from the agony of the desert, and to await the melting of the snows in the passes.

All through the years of the California gold rush they had crowded the Emigrant Trail which led right through the Washoe; they had camped in Gold Canyon and Six-Mile Canyon; they had kept their eyes upon distant horizons and ignored the fabulous wealth which lay under their feet. They did not know that they rested upon land to which they would some day return because it was infinitely richer than the El Dorado they were seeking.

They came, an endless stream of strong men and weaklings, of women and children, of horses and mules and oxen and dogs. They came in covered wagons and on horseback and afoot. They paused in Gold Canyon only long enough to gather fresh strength. They rested and grumbled and moved on. They continued toward a California gold country which was no longer as generous as it had been; they left this bleak mountain and its grim canyons never suspecting that many of them would return to the bit of barren land because it was to prove more incredible than incredibility itself.

The ears of those in the wagon train on the pass were assailed by a new sound. A Wells-Fargo stage, pulled by six powerful mules, rattled by, driver in front, armed messenger behind him, riding backward. The stage was headed toward the Geiger Grade, up which the wagon train had just toiled. It carried two passengers and it also carried bars of gold and silver consigned to banks in San Francisco and Sacramento. The driver and the guard waved as they rattled past. And then they were gone. It was as though the newcomers had broken the last link of a chain which bound them—however tenuously—to the vast country lying to the west.

And now the mules were rested, and the wagon train was ready to move once again. Now that they were at the threshold of Virginia City, there seemed to be less urgency. The men and women moved around, stretching cramped legs, keeping their eyes focused upon the town ahead of them.

And then a phenomenon occurred, a thing that was unexpected and startling.

It was midafternoon, but the sun had started to dip toward the west. It dropped back of the crest of Mount Davidson, and the east side of the mountain took on a mantle of shadow.

The shroud of gloom crept slowly down the mountainside. Within an incredibly short space of time the whole of Virginia City was in the shadow cast by the formidable peak. The rest of the countryside was still drenched with sunshine because only the city itself lay on the precipitous slope of the mountain.

And now, when day was still upon the land, when it was yet bright on the peaks and along the ridges, a premature darkness enfolded Virginia City. Even the forces of nature seemed here to conspire to make this city different from all other cities.

II

WITH A GREAT SHOUTING and cracking of whips, with a great straining of mules and harness and a creaking and groaning of wheels, the caravan rolled on.

Two of the wagons were different from all the others because ornate wooden signs had been imposed on their canvas sides. The signs were brave with gold lettering on crimson backgrounds, and they announced that Professor Brutus Carmichael's Great Amalgamated Shows were invading Virginia City for a stay of indefinite duration.

In the back of one of the gay wagons a young man of twenty-six and a girl of seventeen sat on campstools, their bodies giving with each violent lurch of the lumbering vehicle. They had ridden that way for days, solaced by the thought that for every journey—even for this journey—there must be an end; and now that the goal was in sight they were filled with a sense of exhilaration, of achievement.

The girl's clear blue eyes were shining with excitement; she was smiling; she was gay. Malcolm Douglas looked down upon her from his greater height and greater age.

"Sometimes, Althea," he said lightly, "you remind me of a seventeen-year-old girl."

She looked at him and laughed. She said, "I know what you mean, Malcolm. Today—this afternoon—I feel like that."

"Because the journey is almost over?"

"No." She shook her head. "Because at the end of it is Virginia City."

It had been a long journey and a hard one. But interesting. Up from the fertile Sacramento Valley, through the Sierra forests where there were aspens on the high meadows, willows and alders along

the streams; high, straight fir trees with tapering cones; cedars bending readily before the omnipresent winds; yellow pines, and, at the highest levels, the lodge-pole pines which were known as tamaracks. They had made camp on the incredibly beautiful shores of Lake Tahoe and had marveled at the existence of the great lake at such an altitude; they had followed a narrow, twisting, tortuous road; they had descended into a valley; and then, at length, they had struggled up the well-nigh impossible Geiger Grade until they had come in sight of the brash new metropolis of the Comstock.

Althea was the daughter of Professor Carmichael, who owned the traveling troupe, and of the ample, serene blond woman who had been Anna Schultz of St. Louis until an odd seeking after romance and adventure had caused her to marry the Professor. Anna rode with the Professor and the driver, high up on the seat in the fore part of the wagon. The remaining members of the troupe were scattered through the wagon train, and two of the wagons were loaded with the baggage and theatrical paraphernalia which would shortly be displayed for the entertainment-hungry denizens of the Comstock.

Malcolm Douglas was the outstanding feature of the show. He was a knife-thrower and a good one. To climax his act, he hurled his knives at a living target, and that target was Althea. The element of danger had amused both of them, not because they were unaware, but because it seemed unimportant. An accident could happen, of course. The slightest movement on her part, the tiniest deflection of his wrist, and tragedy could intrude where only entertainment had been planned. But both understood that this was the element which gave zest to the act. Without it, their performance would mean nothing.

He said: "I've never seen you this way Althea. Just what ideas have you got in that pretty little head of yours?"

She smiled saucily and looked up at him from under long blond lashes. "Folks have gotten rich in Virginia City," she said. "I might be lucky."

"You'd make a most attractive miner. I can see you with pick and shovel or whatever tools they use. . . . Just how do you propose to pursue this wealth?"

Her eyes grew serious for a moment. "I don't know, Malcolm. Truly I don't. But if even a small fraction of the stories we've heard about Virginia City is true . . ."

"Looking for a millionaire husband?" His lips were smiling, but his gray eyes were not.

"Perhaps." She made a gesture which encompassed the whole wagon train, the figures of her parents riding with the driver, the

luggage piled high about them, the crude comforts of the wagon itself. "I shan't do this all my life." Radiance returned to her face, and she put her hand in his. "Oh, Malcolm," she said, "why can't you be you and also rich?"

He flushed. "I don't know, my dear. Maybe I've gone at it the wrong way. Perhaps I made a mistake to be born in South Carolina and to be just old enough to enter the army when the war broke out." He continued to banter with words to conceal his worry. "You mean you're above marrying a poor man, Althea? Even one who loves you as much as I do?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid so. But let's not despair. You may be walking down a street in Virginia City some day and stumble over a gold nugget big enough to make us rich."

"I doubt it's done that way."

"I know. . . ." She leaned close to him, so that her hair brushed his cheek, sending a hot thrill through his lithe, well knit body. "What brought you here, Malcolm? What caused you to give up law studies in San Francisco to seek a job with this show? You wouldn't have joined if we hadn't been headed for Virginia City, would you?"

"Probably not."

"Then why—" She made an impatient gesture. "I declare, Malcolm Douglas, you're the most exasperating young man I've ever met. I've known you for almost three months; I've fallen in love with you; we've talked about getting married—and I still don't know anything about you."

"I was born June 26, 1843," he began gravely, but she cut him off.

"You never answer personal questions seriously. What's so important? Why is it a secret? I have a right to know."

"What right?"

"The fact that we're in love with each other."

"That doesn't give you any right, Althea. Now if we were engaged . . ."

"We've been over all that before."

"And we always get back to where we started." The wagon hit a rut, slid violently. The driver cursed graphically and howled at his mules. Althea was thrown into the young man's arms. He held her for a moment, then, as the wagon righted itself, he perched her once again on her campstool. He said, as though there had been no interruption: "Yes, I have a secret. It isn't a very important one, or very exciting. It's as simple and uncomplex as I am, and my reason for not telling you is just as simple."

"What is it?"

"It would give you unjustified hope..It would cloud your vision of your own future."

"Oh, for goodness' sake! You talk in riddles. Why don't you say something besides words?"

"They're all I know. They're the only things I've ever learned that are useful. Except knife throwing, of course."

Silence fell between them, a silence that overlay a harsh symphony of creaking wheels, exhortations of mule skinner, the tinkling of little bells on the harness of the mules.

Althea's effect on Malcolm was a constant source of amazement to him. She was alternately an impulsive, spontaneous child and a calculating, mature woman. She had a firm, young, exciting body, and a mind which probed unerringly to essentials.

She wasn't at all like the few girls he'd known in the past, not at all like the girls he'd met in his native state, or during the four grim years when the Confederacy had been struggling to establish itself as a new nation. She had none of the affectations, none of the vaporings, none of the indirection which he had learned to associate with the opposite sex. She was almost masculine in her fearless approach to life, and at the same time so feminine that she made him ache all over with wanting her.

He had the desire to tell her things about himself, intimate things, things which could only be of interest to someone who loved him and wished to understand. But he had learned to keep his guard up at all times, to cloak himself with a mantle of invulnerability. He had lived much within himself; he could not readily change that.

But, on impulse, he did say something. He said it lightly and casually, and watched for her reaction.

He said, "Suppose I told you that I own a mine in Virginia City?"

She started to laugh thinking that he was jesting. Then she caught an intensity in his eyes and about his lips, and she frowned slightly. "A mine?" she asked, experiencing a new excitement.

A shadow crossed his face. "You're a mercenary little thing, aren't you? At this moment you're not thinking of me at all. You're thinking of dollars and cents, of silver and gold." His voice became harsh. "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, my dear. Yes, I own a mine here: a miserable little hole in the ground which has never paid a cent and never will, a mine that is definitely and permanently in *barranca*."

"*Barranca*?" She caught the new word and turned it over in her mind, searching for its meaning.

"*Barranca*," he repeated. "If you ever had read the San Francisco newspapers, you'd recognize the word. You'd know all the jargon of silver mining. But no, you won't even read. It's simpler to ask."

She ignored the hurt and the anger in his voice. She asked again for the meaning of the word.

"Borrasca means 'worthless,'" he said. "It's a Mexican mining term. It's the opposite of bonanza, and even you know the meaning of that one."

The topic fascinated her: she wouldn't let go. "How do you know your mine is worthless?"

"It's been proved worthless. Conclusively. So don't pin any hopes on it. Try to go back to thinking of me as you did until a few minutes ago, as a person whose past has been destroyed and who has mighty slim prospects for the future."

She said, "I want to know more."

"I don't know any more. I'm not a miner. I've never seen a mine, except those workings around Hangtown, and I didn't even understand them."

"Then why did you make this journey?"

"Curiosity. And also because I don't particularly give a damn where I go or what I do." He softened his tone. He spoke almost gently. "Forget the mine, Althea. I mentioned it to see what effect it would have on you. It never has meant anything to me, and it doesn't mean anything now."

"Then that isn't the sole purpose of your trip here?"

Her instinct was uncanny, but he was angry and refused to enlighten her further.

"I may have another reason," he said. "If so, I intend keeping it to myself. And now, suppose we forget this silly discussion. Suppose . . ."

She looked toward the front of the wagon. The high seat with the three people on it obstructed her view. The canvas walls prevented her from seeing the sides of the road. The only opening was at the rear.

"It's all wrong," she said gently. "We can only look backwards, Malcolm. We ought to be looking ahead."

III

PROFESSOR BRUTUS CARMICHAEL'S Grand Amalgamated Shows reached Virginia City in the midst of confusion.

C Street—stretching as unswervingly from one end to the other as the backbone of a fish—was jammed with traffic: freight wagons

loaded with merchandise, and heavier ones carrying ore; elegant carriages gleaming with fresh varnish and silver trimmings; saddle horses and saddle mules; a procession of a dozen braying jackasses freed temporarily from their labors in the mines and celebrating with an ebullience which long since had won them the appellation of Washoe canaries; pedestrians weaving precariously in and out of the welter, crossing from one wooden sidewalk to another; a few children, a few impassive Chinamen, a stage arriving at the Wells-Fargo office from the Carson Valley; a shift of rugged, mustached miners en route from a mine mouth to the nearest saloon for their first invigorating shots of the type of raw whisky which was known locally as tarantula juice; a few primly dressed ladies moving into and out of narrow little stores; a few other ladies—definitely less prim but certainly more noticeable—enjoying an evening stroll before starting work on the Line, which was situated one block downhill on D Street.

The evening air was heavy with the shouting and cursing of teamsters and mule skinnners, with greetings yelled from friend to friend, with deep-voiced laughter, with the barking of dogs. And over it all lay, like a thin patina of sound, the delicate tinkle of the harness bells.

At the corner of Union and C, something happened to make confusion more confused. All of the arteries crossing C at right angles were steep and straight; Union was the steepest of all, and, being the most important, was the most used.

A wagon driver, headed down Union from B, had made the mistake of not applying the brake to his wheels. The heavy wagon had moved faster and faster, so that in spite of the profane exhortations of the driver the vehicle got out of control. The mules became panicky; the driver wielded his whip and sawed on the reins without avail; the ensemble let the attraction of gravity take over, and thus approached the intersection of C and Union at high speed, and with little restraint. There the mules, the wagon, the driver, and one disconsolate goat became inextricably entangled with the traffic headed north and south on C.

A couple of wagons overturned, the males involved made wild, protesting sounds as they threshed about, and one of the drivers on C Street approached the driver of the runaway wagon and started explaining in no unmistakable language that he was held in very low esteem. That was when the fight started. It was brief and merry, and was apparently conducted without too great rancor, there having been no affront to personal honor involved. Eventually the melee was called off by other drivers because it was necessary to unsnarl the traffic jam, the two principal combatants rambled into the nearest

bit saloon for a few fortifying slugs of whisky, a semblance of order was restored, and traffic flowed again.

The Professor looked at his wife. "Quite a welcome," he said.

She smiled and nodded. "I'm afraid nobody noticed your sign, Brutus."

He shrugged and looked up and down the street, at the traffic—jam or no jam—which blocked it from sidewalk to sidewalk. "We'll do well here," he prophesied. "Men would rather pay to see high-class entertainment than to waste their energies in physical combat." He heaved a deep sigh. "I ask you, Mom, have you ever in your born days seen so many saloons?"

"Brutus!"

"I assure you, madam, that they are of only academic interest to me. A social snifter now and then, perhaps, but I promise you that I have permanently parted company with the demon rum. I was mentioning merely an observable fact, that already I have seen more saloons than one finds in San Francisco."

Mom turned to the driver to inquire whether he knew where they were going. The big muscular man hunched his shoulders and spat tobacco juice over the rim of the off-front wheel.

"A Street, didn't you say, ma'am? 'Tween Taylor an' Washington."

"Yes. He called it a mansion. Perhaps you know him: a Mr. O'Mara?"

"Brian Boru O'Mara?" The driver was suddenly interested.

"That's right."

"Ma'am, everybody hereabouts knows Brian Boru O'Mara. Everybody knows his mansion." Something seemed to strike the driver as exceedingly funny. He threw back his head and roared with deep-bellied laughter. "So *that's* where you're goin' to stay, is it, ma'am?"

The Professor inquired the cause of the driver's merriment. "You'll find out, Professor. But I better leave the O'Mara tell you about it himself."

At the corner of Taylor and C, the two wagons which had been rented by Professor Carmichael cut loose from the others. They were loaded with the personal and professional belongings of the members of the troupe.

The two wagons swung right on Taylor Street and began their slow, tortuous two-block climb. The street was deeply rutted and hard as rock. The metal rims of the wagon wheels slipped and slid and crashed into the rocky depressions, jolting the passengers and causing a great protesting wail to arise from the compartments where the baggage had been stored. "It's on top of the hill, ma'am . . . not *way* on, top, but might' nigh. You jest hang on an' I'll git you there."

They crossed B Street, and in doing so got a glimpse of the Storey County Court House. They continued up into the fast-gathering night, and then, at the corner of A Street, they swung left and went halfway down the block.

The driver halted his six mules in front of the mansion.

"This," he said with a scarcely concealed chuckle, "is *the* mansion—the most famous one in Virginia City."

The way in which he said it carried a significance which transcended the mere size of the residence before which they had stopped. The Professor wanted to question him, but by that time the second wagon had pulled up behind them and the members of the troupe were spilling out, stiff and cramped and sore from their day of brutal jolting.

A huge voice boomed from the front steps of the big house: "Well, if it ain't me old friend Brutus Carmichael! And all his little playmates." A human avalanche bore down on the Professor, and the giant wrapped the pudgy little man in a bearlike hug. "Welcome home, Professor. Welcome home, Mom." Mr. Brian Boru O'Mara waved his hand proudly at the big house which gazed down at them from its background of harsh, ugly mountain. "What do you think of it, folks?"

There were exclamations of surprise and pleasure from all the members of the troupe. Some of them had been more than a trifle appalled since reaching the outskirts of Virginia City; they had felt that even the hardihood gained by years of trouping might be put to undue strain in this wild new town. But this . . .

The mansion of Mr. Brian Boru O'Mara was two stories in height, faced east, and was solidly constructed. It was of no discernible architectural style, though on each of its four roof corners it bulged pretentiously into the eff of medieval battlements.

It was constructed solidly of brick and stone, and it gazed down upon the city, upon the mines and mills, upon the activity of C Street, upon the distant mountains, and upon the long winding scar which had been cut through by some forgotten convulsion of nature . . . the legendary Six Mile Canyon.

The freighters and their assistants started the work of unloading baggage and carrying it into the mansion. Brian Boru O'Mara was an expansive host. He insisted that the Professor and Mom leave the detail work to the others while he accompanied him inside. He was fairly bursting with pride of ownership and the pleasure of hosting such a crowd of boarders.

The men of the party helped the teamsters. O'Mara hailed two Chinamen whom he called Wing and Sing, and instructed them to

pitch in and help. The Professor requested Malcolm Douglas to enlist the assistance of his fellow troupers so that the task of transferring their belongings from the wagons to the house should take the shortest possible time. The ladies of the troupe, aching and weary, but stimulated by the excitement of having reached their destination, followed their host up the steps and into the house.

The interior of the mansion was warm with yellow light. They walked into a spacious parlor, and there was a chorus of Oo-oohs! and Aa-aahs! which delighted the generous, hospitable heart of Mr. Brian Boru O'Mara.

The inevitable chill of night had been tempered by a fire. The center of the tremendous room was dominated by a massive crystal chandelier which hung from a ceiling on which a great deal of elaborate art had been daubed. Cherubs floated hither and yon on improbable clouds, a definitely feminine angel tooted a long trumpet, and a gentleman with long whiskers looked down on the gathering from what seemed to be an awkward horizontal position.

The floor was enriched with thick purple carpeting which ran from wall to wall and was only here and there stained with tobacco juice. There was a great deal of heavy, black oak furniture, and more furniture which was delicate in structure and resplendent with gilt. The heavy furniture was upholstered in slick, shiny mohair, the gilt pieces in brocade. It was all slightly the worse for wear, but impressive for all that.

There were mirrors everywhere, huge sections of plate glass which multiplied the size of the room and accentuated its ornateness. There were two highboys, two marble-topped tables, four hassocks, a mohair and walnut couch, three brass cuspidors, and a rosewood piano. The walls were papered, and if the paper was torn in spots, that only served to add to the air of informality in an otherwise too formal room. The hangings at the windows were of heavy plush and of a shade to match the carpet.

But it was around the walls, between the ceiling and the topmost fringe of papering, that the designer had done himself most proud. In an era of liberal scrollwork, an expert with a jigsaw must have gone mad. It was elaborate, startling, and it circled the four walls of the room.

• Over the fireplace mantel the scrollwork concentrated. There was one area, perhaps ten feet in width and five feet in height, in which the artist had permitted all his gingerbread tendencies to run wild. It would have been bewildering except that everything focused on a design in the center of the panel.

Planned to catch the eye—and succeeding admirably—were two sets of initials. No scrollwork on these: they were carved on a panel of polished black walnut, and carved by a master.

It took no keen eye to decipher the initials. One set was definitely *MDC* and the other, more chastely and simply, *MM*. They were intricately bound together by robust carving of leaves forming a half-wreath, and over the wreath was the figure of a dove in full flight. The dove, it appeared, was carrying something that might have been a large rose, or a small cabbage, in its beak, and, wherever it was going, it seemed to be in a hurry to get there.

Below the intertwined initials, on the mantel, was a large kerosene lamp, turned full and equipped with a reflector so that the light played inexorably on the lavish monograms. Even the Professor, weary as he was, had difficulty in tearing himself away from the enormous work of art.

"M. D. C.—M. M.?" he pondered. "Neither set fits Brian Boru O'Mara."

Mr. O'Mara appeared to find the remark very funny indeed. His laughter shook the house. He said: "I'll tell you all about that one of these days, Professor. Meanwhile, I'd better be showing Mom the upstairs so she can decide where to camp her flock."

On the way up the stairs, O'Mara explained that he had engaged two Chinese boys, one to cook and the other to help generally, and that dinner would be ready in a couple of hours, which would allow the weary travelers time to freshen up.

A long, narrow hall bisected the second floor. On each side of the hallway were three bedrooms. O'Mara explained that he had two more bedrooms downstairs, one large, one small, and that he himself was occupying the large one. Mom was therefore privileged to distribute her troupe as she wished.

She looked into the rooms, said nice things about them, and made her decision with the calm, placid efficiency which marked everything she did. But before announcing the decision, she consulted with her husband, a ritual that applied to everything in their lives, for it gave to the Professor a feeling of importance which was definitely at variance with the facts.

One of the big corner front rooms Mom appropriated for herself and the Professor. Across the hall she placed Rudolph Kleinman—Rudolph the Great—star of the show, and Heinrich Kramer, the male half of a brother-and-sister juggling team. In the middle room on the north side of the hall she arranged to place Gregory and Marcella Drake, their dance team; and across the hall she put Manny Hirsch, who was billed as Sambo and who was their blackface

comedian, and with him Malcolm Douglas. One of the rear corner rooms was marked for Althea Carmichael and Barbara Hamilton, the show's "famous singer of songs," while the remaining upstairs room was to be occupied in solitary grandeur by Heide Kramer, sister of Heinrich, and partner in his act.

There was a great clangor in the halls, upstairs and down. Men sweated with trunks and bags. Mom took charge, seeing to the proper distribution of the baggage, forestalling arguments before they started.

"Then," she said, "we'll all use those lovely basins and pitchers to make ourselves clean. After that we'll go down for dinner, Mr. O'Mara. And I hope you've got plenty to eat because I'm sure we're all starved."

Mr. O'Mara reassured her. He draped one huge arm over the shoulder of his diminutive friend Professor Carmichael, and started downstairs with him, ignoring the confusion in the hallway. He whispered something to the pudgy little Professor in a conspiratorial manner, and Mom, watching, smiled affectionately.

"By dinnertime," she told herself, "Brutus will be drunk as an owl. And the poor darling has earned it."

IV

IN ONE OF the smaller middle rooms, Gregory and Marcella Drake stripped off their dirty, dusty traveling clothes. He appropriated the washbasin first while she threw a robe about her slim figure and stretched out on the bed in an ecstasy of relaxation.

Gregory Drake was moderately tall, slender and dark. His figure was good, and he knew it. He also entertained the belief that he was handsome.

In that he was wrong. His sharp black eyes were set too close, his forehead was too low, and the wave in his glossy black hair was too perfect. He was a little man mentally and a coward physically. He had got nowhere in the theatrical profession and was going nowhere, and this—because he would not admit his own deficiency—he blamed on Marcella.

Marcella was about five feet four inches in height and weighed approximately 120 pounds. She had the hard, firmly muscled body of the professional dancer, and she looked years older than her twenty-eight.

Marcella had been tired for longer than she could remember. She hated the life, the hardship, the bleakness of her future. She hated her husband, chiefly because she knew he hated her, and because he was vindictive and cruel, because he had a mean, waspish nature and a vitriolic tongue, because his own inferiority made him jealous when—certainly until recently—there had been no cause for jealousy. Marcella was weary—oh, so terribly—of being penned up in a miserable room with her miserable man. And that was the way it always had been and always would be: You start with love in your heart, and the hard knocks are fun for a while. Then they're no longer fun, and eventually hope dies. If by then love has died too, the road ahead seems too dreary, too long, too meaningless.

Towelng his body, Gregory walked over to the big double bed with its brass footposts and great brass canopy. He stood looking down at his wife. He said, "You're losing whatever good looks you had."

His tone was edgy. It signaled her that he wished to quarrel, and so she said nothing. That much she had taught herself: to ignore him.

She got up and dropped her robe. She walked to the washstand, as indifferent to her nudity as was her husband. She emptied into the big china jar the dirty water he had left in the basin, and she mopped the marble top of the washstand.

Quietly, thoroughly, but indifferently, she soaped herself all over, having first put a towel on the floor. The alkali dust seemed to have cut deep into her fair skin; her whole body felt gritty. She scrubbed industriously, totally oblivious to the fact that Gregory was talking and still more unmindful of what he was saying.

The water was cool and refreshing. She laved her body with fresh water and reached for a clean towel. She rubbed it over her face, her neck, her breasts, and just as she was about to bend over to dry her legs she felt Gregory's hand on her arm and she was flung around so violently that she would have fallen had she not grabbed the edge of the washstand.

His face was close to hers, and his voice was harsh.

"God damn it!" he said. "You haven't answered me."

She mopped her torso and thighs, saying nothing.

"I'm not blind," he rasped. "I can see what's going on. But if you've got to turn whore, why do you do it with a fleabitten dog like Manny Hirsch?"

So that was it. The name cut through to her consciousness, making her feel resentful and angry and unclean. There was no fear in the glance she turned on her husband then, only bitterness and anger.

"You're a dirty little man with a dirty little mind," she said.

He struck her. And he would have done it again except that something in her eyes stopped him. "One of these days when you do that," she said flatly, "I'll kill you."

She turned away from him, no longer afraid. Oh, she'd be afraid again and again and again; she knew that. But at the moment she had won, and it was a fine feeling except that she didn't know what it was she had won or why it had been necessary to win it.

Manny Hirsch was the Sambo of the troupe, the wizened, lonely little man who had failed in life and who had even failed in minstrels. He was their blackface comedian. He played banjo and bones and harmonica. He told jokes and he sang a couple of funny songs, and he was most comic because he couldn't help being that way, because nature had caused him to be born a misfit. Because people had always laughed at Manny Hirsch, he had put himself on exhibition for them, the only trouble being that they didn't laugh quite hard enough to make him a successful performer. He had been the last to join the troupe, and he would be the first to go if there should ever be need to retrench.

And somehow, soon after the troupe had been organized, two lost and lonely souls found each other. Manny Hirsch and Marcella Drake had looked into each other's eyes and seen a mutuality of understanding, a comprehension of suffering. And since then, whenever Gregory had been unusually difficult, Marcella had seen Manny's kindly eyes observing her, had felt the wave of sympathy, had known that in him she had a friend—the first friend she'd had since girlhood.

There had been no open word, no sly touch of hands, no gesture. Until now everything they had had to say to each other had been accomplished in the course of casual conversation, always in front of other people . . . yet each had known for some time that the other knew. It was a thing that was delicate and personal and very, very fragile.

And now Gregory Drake had sullied it. He had cloaked something clean in garments that were filthy.

What he did not know was that he had planted in the mind of his wife a seedling which must some day sprout, a thought which could never have been conceived by itself.

In one of the corner rooms Althea Carmichael and Barbara Hamilton finished their washing, donned linen chemises, and lay side by side on the bed.

Barbara was the troupe's vocalist. She possessed a husky contralto

and had the gift of putting into any ballad a depth of sentimentality which she was far from feeling.

She was a large woman, luxuriantly endowed with those attributes best calculated to attract masculine attention. Yet her experience with men, until now, had all been on the more unfortunate side. It was natural, and in her case inevitable, Barbara had the bad habit of falling in love, and always with the wrong person.

She had spent the last several years escaping from one love affair only to run squarely into another. With each fresh disaster she felt that she had learned the necessary lesson; following each disaster she embarked unerringly on a new and more devastating one.

Barbara knew nothing about her roommate. To her, Althea was an immature child with a child's unreasoning courage. She had never gone beneath the surface of the girl who lay beside her, never suspected that Althea was all things to all people, that she studiously molded herself into whatever pattern was calculated to please her companion of the moment. She did not suspect that there was any depth to the child, any calculation . . . and in that she was unfortunately wrong because between the two women there could have been some sort of bond, even though the forces that motivated them would always be different. Althea would be controlled always by her brain, Barbara Hamilton by her emotions; yet each was seeking for something solid, and to each Virginia City presented opportunity.

"It seems like a hard town," said Barbara.

"Yes." Althea was talking to herself rather than to her companion.

"Not at all what I expected."

"Do you think we'll be successful here?"

"I suppose so. Father was told that they're hungry for entertainment. They'll buy tickets to anything." She was silent for a moment, and then she said something which Barbara accepted as the query of an innocent, untutored young girl. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," asked Althea, "to find your own millionaire here?"

Barbara smiled indulgently. "I suppose so," she agreed. "When I was your age, that's what I used to hope for."

In the front corner room—across the hall from Mom and the Professor—Rudolph Kleinman and Heinrich Kramer stood at the window looking down on the lights, the smoke, the stark ugliness of Virginia City.

They were both tall, both dark, both originally from Germany; but there the similarity ended.

Rudolph was a great man in his field, and if he fell far short of

being as great as he believed himself to be that was only because the ego had outgrown the man.

"To this place I come," he said. "Here there is great wealth. Here one can become very rich. But the place, it is hideous."

Heinrich Kramer, the juggler, nodded. He never argued with anyone, and particularly not with Rudolph. "A long way it is from Berlin," he agreed. "For Heide and myself, there will be no going back. We are old, as jugglers go, and soon we no longer will have the skill." He stopped, and a smile of rare charm appeared. "But I talk so wrong. Is not this the land of opportunity? Yes, better to see the possibility of success as you see it, Rudolph, than to wrap myself in gloom."

Rudolph said: "It is my intention to remain here. Other men have grown wealthy in this fantastic place. What other men have done, Rudolph the Great can do."

Heinrich nodded and pretended to agree. But he knew that Rudolph was wrong. He knew that Virginia City offered nothing to Rudolph except a brief interlude of optimism, while to him and his sister it offered not even that.

Mom sat in the rocker near the window. Faintly from downstairs there came to her ears the sound of two masculine voices raised in song. That would be the Professor and his friend Brian Boru O'Mara, filled with good fellowship and whisky.

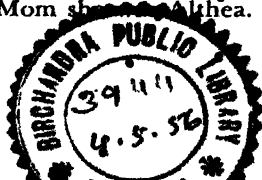
Mom smiled gently. She could handle her husband. She knew just when to give him straying room and when to pull in on the tether. Right now there were others who worried her much more than the Professor did.

The Drakes, for instance. Through the wall she had heard the sound of their quarreling without being able to distinguish the words. She had heard it many times, and she knew that the end was not yet, because the basic note of their quarrels was steadily becoming more somber, more dangerous.

She had seen with placid, wise eyes the reaching out of Marcella Drake for Manny Hirsch, and had noted Manny's instinctive response. That was something she'd have to watch.

She was worried about Heide Kramer, too. Heide and her brother were charming, but they were moody, discouraged. And Heide didn't even have a roommate. She was alone, down at the other end of the hall, alone with her loneliness.

And Althea. Mom sighed. Althea might be all things to all people, but to Mom she was Althea. She'd require a lot of watching, that



daughter of hers. It would take a deal of supervision to keep her from wrecking the lives of others and her own life along with it.

This much Mom knew: It was too late to make Althea over. She was a contradiction of good qualities and of bad. She could be guided but never controlled. But at least Mom understood her daughter, and that was something that no one else did.

In the room he shared with Manny Hirsch, Malcolm Douglas stood at the window. He too was gazing down at the spectacle which was Virginia City, and listening to its sounds.

The physical aspects of the country constituted a shock from which he had not yet recovered. Raised in the low flat rich coastal country of South Carolina, he'd never experienced such forbidding harshness of terrain. It was something to which he could not readily accustom himself.

Mountains. Yes, there had been mountains around San Francisco, but those had been different. They had been rich and green, and the valleys had been fertile. There had also been the bay to look upon whenever the fog lifted. It was a beautiful landlocked harbor, and it reminded him somehow of Charleston. Water he understood; lush vegetation he understood. It would be difficult, he reflected, to become accustomed to a land where there was no water, no vegetation, nothing save forbidding rock.

He knew a great deal about the Comstock for one who had never been there. He had read and studied and talked. He had learned many things; but he had learned better than any other lesson the fact that the Comstock was different from anything else he had ever known, that it was a land of new ways, new customs, new standards.

Existence here would be different from the life he'd known before the war, the life which had been cut from under him before he'd ever had a chance to know it well. It would be different from the graciousness with which he had once rubbed elbows; it would be different from the devastation to which he had returned in 1865. Whatever it was, whatever it offered, it would be different.

Malcolm Douglas was all tied up in knots. Some of the knots he understood and intended to unravel; there were others of which he was not even aware. There were things to be learned, things to be done. The land itself was a challenge: its hardness, its grimness, its promise of reward.

Malcolm Douglas was twenty-six years of age. Already he had known conflict and suffering and disillusion. There seemed to be little left that could be taken from him. He felt the formidable countryside reaching up to him, demanding to be understood, to be encountered on its own terms. He was young and hard and resilient.

Whatever was needed, somewhere in himself he would find those qualities.

Three thousand miles away he had abandoned his false gods.

In the streets and houses of the compact city of twenty thousand, more than a mile above the level of the sea, men walked and talked and gambled and drank, and the thoughts of all of them were upon bonanza.

Somewhere down below were men whose names were already beginning to take on stature: men like John Mackay and William Sharon and Adolph Sutro and Jim Fair and George Hearst and Lucky Baldwin.

There were men who had given their names to the city, to the Lode, and to the richest of the mines; men who had never suspected that they held the wealth of the Indies in their hands and who had let it go for a song or a bottle of whisky or out of sheer ignorance and good fellowship: men like Old Virginny, after whom the town had been named; Henry Comstock, who had given his name to the Lode itself; Gould and Curry and Norcross and Hale and Chollar and Potosi, men already forgotten while their names were becoming legendary.

It was America's greatest land of opportunity. It bestowed its favors reluctantly, and then only upon those of unflagging courage, dogged determination, and great luck.

That much Malcolm Douglas knew about the strange place to which he had come; that much he knew and respected.

He recalled a maxim of Mexican silver mining lore which the Comstock had learned and which had been passed on to him by an old miner in a lunch room in San Francisco: "As many days as you are in borrasca, just that many days shall you be in bonanza."

Borrasca. The word applied to a good part of his life, to many days and many years.

But for just as many days as he had been in borrasca, that many days—that many years—was Malcolm Douglas determined to be in bonanza.

V

DINNER WAS a huge success. The food—of which the chief dish was roast beef—was fine, plentiful, and well prepared. There were speeches, so that the gathering resembled a formal banquet.

Brian Boru O'Mara bade them official welcome to Virginia City. His great voice boomed through the room and bounced off the walls. He informed the ladies that this was the finest town in the West and that they would be able to purchase everything their hearts desired provided their pocketbooks could stand the strain. He informed the gentlemen that Virginia City was a sink of iniquity, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke, and at least two of the gentlemen decided they would go forthwith to see for themselves.

He told them that a man must be cautious in Virginia City, that even the most casual remarks must be carefully phrased because, as he explained, the tempers of most of the gentlemen were violent and explosive. It wasn't a fighting town, he declared; it wasn't a bad town . . . but things had a way of happening with startling abruptness.

He informed those who planned to wander the bypaths to be careful at all times, not alone because of men who might seek to relieve them of their worldly goods, but—more importantly—because of walking into open mine shafts. The big shafts, he told them, were safe enough because they worked twenty-four hours a day and were therefore observable; but there were also many which had been abandoned, at least temporarily, and which yawned in highly improbable places. The only difference, he said, between falling into an operating mine and an abandoned one was that in the former case your body was discovered more quickly.

"And in conclusion," he boomed, "a word about myself. Several times this night I have called you my guests. Would that such were the truth; would that I could afford the luxury.

"Unfortunately, you see before you a man virtually bereft of material things. This mansion is mine, and the manner of its becoming so is perchance neither interesting nor dramatic, but it is typical of this land in which the all of yez will be making your home temporarily.

"The carved initials you see are those of Mathew D. Clayton. He is a man small of stature and of soul. He was my friend and partner in the early days of the Comstock. We prospered. He fell in love with an estimable young lady whose initials you see intertwined with his over the mantel. Fortunately for her, she is not also intertwined with him. She broke her engagement while yet there was time, leaving Mathew Clayton with a lavish home but no bride.

"At that time he manipulated what he called a reorganization. When it had been completed, he and I were no longer partners. He had all the money, all our mining properties, all our prospects. I owned this mansion—which he did not want. I could have crushed him between my two hands, but 'twould have availed me nothing, so

I accepted what was allotted me with the best possible grace. That, my friends, you will learn is the way of the Comstock. You seek good fortune, but you take what you must.

"'Tis sad to confess that my own financial condition is unstable. I can only say therefore that you are all the guests of my heart, but that I am compelled to exact a meager monthly tribute from each of you. You are living in one of the finest homes in Virginia City. You will eat well. And for this you will each be charged \$30 per month. 'Tis a modest emolument, my friends. I trust that from this moment on you will regard my home as your home. I thank you."

The Professor made a speech. It was a gay little talk, not too coherent, and more than a trifle alcoholic in tone. He assured them that they were all his children. He said that his great friend Mr. O'Mara had arranged for them to give their initial performance at the Opera House on Friday night, and that thereafter they would perform on any and all evenings that other shows had not been booked in . . . for at least as long as the good citizens continued to buy tickets at the box office and to spend money for Professor Carmichael's Elixir of Eternity.

He stated that he and Mr. O'Mara were now about to sally forth into the heart of Virginia City, there to distribute handbills announcing the premiere, and to accept whatever good cheer might be forthcoming from a grateful citizenry. He hoped that those who were weary would retire early and sleep well. As for himself, they would find him laboring diligently in their behalf on C Street.

He beamed and twinkled and focused his eye—not without difficulty—on Mom to estimate her reaction to his industry. She smiled affectionately and bade him Godspeed. She promised to have cold towels ready for him at whatever hour he should return, and she hoped he'd enjoy himself.

The Professor sparkled. He extended himself to the uttermost limit of his very modest height, raised his glass, and said: "I give you Mom; the finest, most understanding wife a man ever had. And the most beautiful."

The toast was drunk. Chairs scraped back from the table. Malcolm Douglas moved through the parlor into the hall, and there he encountered Althea Carmichael.

"Are you going out?" she asked.

He nodded.

She looked at him steadily. Then she touched his hand ever so briefly.

"Good luck," she said.

VI

MALCOLM DOUGLAS had questioned O'Mara, so he knew where he was going.

The night was cold, and a wind howled down from the mountains, whipping against him as though it were winter. It was a sharp, unexpected contrast to the sunshiny warmth of the day, and he was to learn that it was always like that on the Comstock: windy and cold at night in summer; windy and cold all the time in fall and winter and spring.

He walked northward a block and a half to Union Street, picking his way carefully in the blackness. The packed pathways that did duty as sidewalks by the mere fact that they were elevated above the road were rutty and treacherous. To the throb of the city there had been added the howling of the wind.

He heard the continuous roar of traffic on C Street, the incessant shouting of teamsters who seemed never to sleep, the continuous shrill of the whistles at the hoists, the pounding of the stamps in the great reducing mills. He felt the pulsation of the city itself, and it seemed to reach up to him and to beckon as it crouched at the foot of the steep declivity which was Union Street.

He paused briefly at the corner of C and Union. On his left was the great bulk of the International Hotel, on his right the doubtful allure of a saloon that called itself the Sawdust Corner. A group of squat, broad-shouldered men stood arguing vehemently, and Malcolm stopped to listen. He caught words and even whole sentences:

"... John Mackay and the Kentuck ... Millions ..."

"... and the Crown Point ..."

"How about the Yellow Jacket?"

"But Mackay ... he was just lucky."

"Luck! Don't talk like an idiot. They were in bonanza in the Crown Point just north of him, and also in the Yellow Jacket to the south. ... The Lode was running that way; it had to cut through the Kentuck. He figured that out. He'll be a big man around here."

A quiet voice said, "Maybe. For a while."

"What do you mean, 'For a while'?"

"Until he gets big enough to attract Sharon's attention. Then the Bank crowd will crush him."

"Like they've beaten Sutro?"

"Like they've beaten everybody. Sharon is smart. He lets others find the bonanzas, then he gathers them in."

"Sutro is crazy anyway. His whole tunnel idea is insane. If it was any good, Sharon would take it away from him. Sharon has a way of knowing things. I hear he's been buying Hale & Norcross. . . ."

Malcolm moved on. The names he had heard were not entirely unfamiliar, for he'd done a great deal of reading about the Comstock, but most of their talk was still gibberish. The men he'd overheard had talked with such vehemence, such authority. It reminded him of the war years when private soldiers in the Confederate Army had criticized grand strategy, had debated the merits of various generals. They had talked authoritatively too. If you hadn't known better, you'd have thought they knew a great deal. Or perhaps you agreed with them and realized that nobody had the power to do anything about it, certainly not a man whose job it was to ride a horse, swing a saber, fire a pistol, obey orders, freeze half to death or almost die of heat, and to fight when and where and how he was told. The army had been confusing when you tried to think beyond your own little world. Malcolm felt that the Comstock could be confusing, too. He had absorbed enough to evaluate for himself.

He walked south on one side of C Street, crossed, and came back to the corner of Union on the other side. It was ugly and drab, but somehow impressive and exhilarating: every second establishment a saloon and faro parlor; wooden sidewalks, little stores with fifteen- and twenty-foot frontages displaying handsome wares at high prices; restaurants offering foods brought in from California.

Once again he got the impression of smallness, or narrowness. The whole town seemed hemmed in, restricted by the topography of the barren country; it seemed too crowded, too busy, too grim, too impersonal. And the wind, so out of place on an August night, ripped and tore at the buildings, and none of the natives seemed to pay the slightest attention.

Malcolm walked north on C Street, his thoughts down the hill from whence came the throb of industry. At the third corner north of Union, he turned right and descended another steep grade. Eventually he came to a busy, sprawling area of mine buildings, and over the doorway of the shaft house was a simple sign that said "Ophir."

The fabulous Ophir, discovered first in 1853 as a surface working which yielded a poor quality of gold and a great deal of blue stuff which clogged the rockers of prospectors and washed away their quicksilver; the Ophir which was the key to the entire Comstock Lode, and which had been treated with indifference and then aban-

doned by its original discoverers; the Ophir which had flared into new life and wealth not too long since.

The buildings were squat, undignified, and unimpressive. The hoisting machinery groaned and growled as it brought little cars to the surface to be trundled away; and unless you knew that the cars were filled with quartz which bore silver and gold you would find it all very drab.

Malcolm picked his way carefully south on E Street. Twice, despite the warnings of Brian Bóru O'Mara, he almost stepped into yawning mine shafts. It was dark down here after the brightness of the Ophir diggings. The whole stretch, back beyond Union Street, seemed composed of tiny deserted mine workings, plus a few others which were being worked in desultory fashion.

And then he found it: a decrepit hoisting works, a few bits of abandoned cable, a disconsolate dump, a tiny little structure which, for want of a better word, you could call an office. And over the door of the office was a crudely printed sign: BIG CYPRESS. Beneath it the name "Logan Berkeley, Supt.," had been printed, then smeared out with a few strokes of a paintbrush, and below that the inscription "M. Douglas, Owner."

Malcolm waited until his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom. So this was Big Cypress. This was his property. This was what a little mine looked like when it was in borrasca. Barren, forlorn, ashamed of its past and without hope of the future; surrounded by other little mines which seemed to have made their own futile gestures and then given up in despair.

He approached the shaft. It looked merely like a blacker spot in the middle of the blackness. An unhealthy stench arose from it. It backed away to avoid the odor, and in doing so stumbled and almost fell over a rusty broken wheelbarrow.

He remained there a long time, thinking. This was his mine, his property, the first thing he had ever owned. And what was it? A barren hole sunk into barren ground; an emptiness in the middle of a fantastic city, and worth nothing. It was a visual example of the word "borrasca." . . . Malcolm remembered the definition: "the nadir of bad luck." The nadir indeed—with a hole in it.

But the tiny spot—it couldn't have been more than fifteen feet in length—showed evidence of having been worked. That would be Logan Berkeley. The evidence of his labors was unmistakable. He had fought his fight before abandoning the prospect. Knowing nothing whatever about mines or mining, Malcolm could see that, and he felt a sense of relief, not uncoupled with justification. The mine was about what he had expected, even though it looked different from

anything that could have been anticipated. It looked as though it had been worked earnestly and abandoned reluctantly. And the other little workings about it looked equally desolate and hopeless.

The gamble that had failed, the mine which had never known bonanza. There was a sardonic satisfaction in observing the meticulousness with which Logan had caused his own name to be painted out and that of M. Douglas substituted.

It was all very simple and understandable. Or rather, it would have been had Malcolm not heard stories of Logan's success elsewhere on the Lode.

The Rattlesnake. That was the name of Logan's productive mine. Malcolm, with four years of wartime cavalry training behind him, was rapidly getting his bearings. The Rattlesnake was off to the south. What was it they called the place? Gold Hill. The mines? He'd memorized them from San Francisco newspapers which seemed to print little except news from the Comstock.

Names came back to him from the conversation he'd overheard outside the Sawdust Corner saloon: Yellow Jacket, Kentuck, Crown Point. They were in bonanza. They were in Gold Hill. The Rattlesnake was there too.

Malcolm started south toward the Divide and Gold Hill. He wanted to see Logan Berkeley's mine. He wanted to see what a bonanza—even the smallest bonanza—looked like.

VII

MALCOLM moved slowly through the lower town, that portion of Virginia City which spilled down the steep eastern flank of Mount Davidson and eddied about the mines and mills and dumps.

Down there he found no mansions, no stanch houses, no structures of brick and stone. Instead he found a congested area of wall-to-wall shacks, flimsily constructed and lacking every vestige of comfort. They were rooming houses, and there thousands of the miners lived. True, the men received \$4 for an eight-hour day, which was the highest labor wage in the world, and they could have afforded better quarters, but there seemed to be no happy medium: You were either above D Street, where there was a reasonable assurance of comfort, or you were below, living in ramshackle structures which were divided into

rooms by partitions of cloth and paper, without adequate water and with the most primitive apology for sanitary accommodation.

The noise in the lower town was incessant. It beat on Malcolm's ears as he moved through it, and he wondered how the men who lived down there ever slept. There were constant pounding and a grinding, the shrieking of whistles at the hoists, braying of Washoe canaries, shouting of men, clangor of machinery, rumbling of dump cars, beat of traffic . . . of ore wagons and freight teams, of machinery being delivered and unloaded and assembled and put into operation.

The streets were not laid out regularly in the lower town. They jutted off at crazy angles so that it was impossible to know where you were unless you paused occasionally to take your bearings from the imposing bulk of Mount Davidson itself and from the line of light which marked the north-to-south course of C. Street.

Men crowded past Malcolm, unmindful of him, indifferent to him. They were powerful men, all. Some were en route to the mines and mills, some were headed toward the upper town, some were about to seek rest in the flimsy rooming houses. Many were sober, many drunk; some were quiet, some boisterous. But even the quietest of conversations had to be pitched stridently in order to be heard at all above the roar. There was an effect of violence in the very speech of the men.

Malcolm mounted again to the comparative quiet of C Street. Of course it wasn't quiet there, but it seemed to be. It wasn't attractive, either, but it was attractive by comparison with the lower town. Though the noise boiled up at him from below, he was no longer trapped in it. He smiled slightly and struck off toward an eminence which jutted up a half-mile to the south.

The wind had abated. It had gone almost as suddenly as it had whipped down from one of the mountains of the Washoe Range. Its absence enhanced his new feeling of tranquillity while it also emphasized its temporary quality.

He passed the works of a great mine, the Bullion, of which he had heard great things promised. He didn't know much about it except that the San Francisco exchange had not yet experienced any great excitement over its shares. He crossed the Divide and saw spread out before him the expanse which was Gold Hill. The town itself lay far below, at the bottom of a long, twisting grade.

Actually, save for the break in the contour caused by the Divide, there was no certainty where Virginia City ended and Gold Hill began. The streets of Gold Hill were not laid out as evenly as those of the upper town in Virginia City, and, at first glance, there appeared to be fewer lights, fewer pretentious buildings.

Across the street from the firehouse he saw the shafts of the Sandy Bowers-Eilly Orrum mine, and tried to remember what he had heard about it and its former owners: something about having been the first millionaires of the Comstock, about an extravagant mansion in the valley west of the Washoe Range, about neglect and carelessness and good fellowship and indifference—and ruin. But there was the mine, operating busily, still producing silver and gold for whoever happened to own it at the moment.

He strolled past the Exchequer, the Alpha and the Imperial; they blazed with light and hummed with activity. The mines generally seemed smaller here than on the other side of the Divide, but busier. There was an odd fascination in watching this highly organized disorder, this grim labor which was producing enough new wealth to wreck the economy of the entire Pacific coast.

He moved on down to the ravine at the foot of the long hill, then halted suddenly. Because his eye had probed ahead to the massive works of the Yellow Jacket, he had almost missed the tiny hoisting works and miniature office which was marked with a crude sign bearing the legend RATTLESNAKE—Logan Berkeley, Supt.

Malcolm's initial reaction was one of incredulity. No matter how busy this operation might be, one could not credit the fanciful tales he had heard. It was impossible to look at the tiny enterprise and think in terms of a thousand dollars a day, or of any sum worth considering. Even on the Comstock such things could not be.

He moved closer to the infinitesimal office, knowing that he was thoroughly concealed in the Stygian gloom of his background. He could see inside.

There was a crude table, and next to it a higher one, such as an accountant or a draftsman might use. The place was illumined with four kerosene lamps. As he watched, the hoisting machinery trembled and groaned and the cage platform appeared on the surface. A car, loaded with ore, rolled off on a little track, a man pushing it. The platform dropped out of sight again, deep into the ground. A bell rang somewhere. The mine whistle shrieked, and, as though in acknowledgment, the whistle of the adjacent Yellow Jacket gave an answering kellow.

There was a man working in the Rattlesnake office. Alone. He was seated at the table, and he was dressed just as all the other men Malcolm Douglas had seen were dressed: broad-brimmed felt hat, flannel shirt, denim pants, miner's boots. Save for a mustache, he was clean-shaven.

The man laid aside the papers he had been studying, stretched, and rose. He was tall and lean and dark, and along the left side of

his jaw there was a long white scar. It was then that Malcolm recognized Logan Berkeley.

The scar brought memories: a pre-dawn cavalry skirmish in northern Virginia; shouts, thunder of hoofs, barking of pistols, flashing of sabers, crash of horses meeting in full career. Then a glimpse of Private Logan Berkeley, C.S.A., with blood streaming over his ragged uniform. It hadn't been much of an action, nor much of a wound, but for a moment Malcolm had known a fear which he could never have experienced for himself.

Malcolm restrained the impulse to walk into the office to greet the man who had been his friend. It wasn't easy. There was something between them that stretched back to earliest boyhood, that reached its tendrils into a land which was gentle and lavish and green and tranquil, a land so different from this harsh country as to seem of another planet.

Malcolm took a single step toward the office, then halted. It was for this he had come to Virginia City: to find out, to differentiate between fact and rumor, to learn whether the man with the scar was indeed his friend or whether he had abandoned the tradition of honor and decency in which he had been raised and had sold himself to the new gods of this new region.

Friendship and ethics and right and wrong and past and present and future were all tied up in this. Now that Malcolm had seen for himself, it was necessary for him to retrace his steps and to try to understand what it was he had seen, to learn what had caused it to be.

Slowly, reluctantly even, he turned away and started back toward Virginia City. A mood of depression was upon him. At the moment he felt as though it could not matter what Logan Berkeley had done. All that mattered was that once—long, long ago—in another time and another world, Logan Berkeley had been his friend.

VIII.

THE HIGH BRIGHT GAY voice which billowed out into C Street on a wave of cigar smoke as a door swung open and then closed again decided Malcolm.

All the way back from Gold Hill—and that long, lonely mile—he had been reaching for a decision. He wanted a drink. He wanted two or three drinks. He wanted something to take his thoughts away from

himself, to keep them from going around in circles. He wasn't a drinking man, but he knew that what he needed then was the surcease that only alcohol could bring.

The voice which had spurted out at him from the saloon belonged to the Professor. There was no other voice like it in the world: no voice so bright, so gay, so untroubled, so perpetually optimistic.

Malcolm shoved open the door and went inside. His nostrils were assailed by the mingled odors of human sweat, of bad whisky and worse cigars, of chewing tobacco.

Men were lined up two deep at the bar. Malcolm paused long enough to ask for a drink, and when the little glass was shoved at him he asked how much. The bartender looked at him curiously and said flatly, "Bit house."

Malcolm hesitated, one hand in his trousers pocket. The bartender smiled ever so slightly. "Stranger round here?"

"Yes."

"Two bits for two drinks," explained the bartender. "That's a quarter."

"And if I only want one?"

"One bit. Ten cents."

It wasn't sensible, but the bartender seemed less amused by his arithmetic than by Malcolm's ignorance of local custom. He accepted the dime Malcolm tossed on the counter and turned his attention to three men who were clamoring for service. Malcolm took the whisky at a gulp, shook his head, shivered momentarily, and then, as the warm glow suffused him, looked about the place.

It was narrow, a fact that had impressed him about every building he'd observed on C Street. It was small and crowded. The whole town, in the midst of a vast expanse of nothing, seemed cramped for space.

The bar ran down one wall. The mirror behind it was neither large nor clean. At the far end of the room, jammed so close together that the men gathered about were packed like sardines, two gambling tables were in operation: faro and monte. Rancid cigar smoke hung over the tables, but they were the only quiet spots in the room.

Midway down the bar the huge figure of Brian Boru O'Mara towered above the general populace, but it was not the voice of Mr. O'Mara that held forth; it was the resonant, high-pitched tones of Professor Brutus Carmichael. The Professor had an audience, and he was giving his all, distributing handbills, and extolling the virtues of Professor Carmichael's Great Amalgamated Shows.

"Friday night at the Opera House, my friends," he declaimed. "Unbelievable, fantastic, incredible, stupendous, and otherwise sen-

sational. The greatest galaxy of brilliant stars ever gathered beneath the canopy of Heaven. Dancing, singing, music—'nother whisky, bartender—legerdemain, illusionary miracles; breath-taking, death-defying, awesome. Thanks, bartender. How 'bout you, O'Mara? Bring your wives, families, and sweethearts. This greatest of all shows is clean, refined, and as above reproach as Caesar's wife. Now, tell me once again: Will you all be there?"

Obviously this was a signal, a routine, because the rough, gruff men gathered about the Professor threw back their heads and roared delightedly, "That we will!"

"Friday night?"

"That we will!"

"Every night thereafter?"

"That we will!"

Malcolm edged through the crowd. The Professor spied him, uttered a howl of welcome, and lurched forward to grab his hand, thereby almost falling on his face. "Malcolm, my boy," he shouted, "permit me to inform you that we have established ourselves in the world's most hos-hos-hostipabbel city, where the welcome is warm and the whisky even warmer." He swung on his audience. "I told you about Malcolm the Magnificent, my friends, the cool-as-ice young man who defies fate by hurling knives at a fair young lady, missing her by the scantest fractions of inches. This, gentlemen, is that young man. This is Malcolm. Have a drink, Malcolm."

They eyed the young man with interest. One man wanted to know if what the Professor had been telling them was true, and Malcolm grinned. "I don't know," he confessed. "The Professor can lay it on pretty thick when he gets going."

"The knives you throw are heavy?"

Scarcely a man saw Malcolm's hand move. It vanished under his coat, reappeared in a split second, twisted, and a gleam of light streaked through the smoke-laden atmosphere. There was a sinister, singing sound, then a thud as the knife buried itself in the wooden wall, scarcely a foot above the head of the tallest man. It drove deep and remained quivering.

"Look it over," invited the young man calmly.

There was a gasp, then someone reached up and pulled the knife out of the wall. He looked at it, passed it around, then gazed again at the sandy-haired young man. "Well, I'll be God damned," he said. He shook his head and a smile twisted his lips. "Feller, I ain't aimin' to git into no ruckus with you."

He let them examine the knife and discuss it. The Professor took

over the explanations. Malcolm accepted a second whisky and managed to edge Brian Boru O'Mara a few feet down the bar.

"You've been around quite a while, haven't you, Mr. O'Mara?"

"Virginia City?" The voice couldn't help being big. "Got here in '60."

"Do you know anything about a mine—a small one—called the Rattlesnake?"

"Over in Gold Hill? Owned by a man name of Berkeley?"

"That's the one. Is it successful?"

"Successful? Boy! You sure ain't been around here long. The Rattlesnake's in bonanza, me boy. Fifteen feet right next to the Yellow Jacket, and they got a pocket of ore that'd make your eyes bug out. Thousand dollars a day, easy. Maybe more."

"Berkeley owns it all?"

"Just him. 'Tis a great man he is, that Berkeley. Won it in a poker game. Saw the game myself. He'd built up a stake from nothing. Had gold and silver piled up in front of him. It had narrowed down to two hands, Berkeley and this other feller. The man says he's got no more cash, but he owns a mine that's in borrasca. He was honest enough about it. The mine was called something else then, I don't remember rightly. But he asked if Berkeley would let him put that up, and Berkeley said Yes, he would. So this man put up his mine, and Berkeley called him and they laid down their hands. 'Three eights,' says the man. 'Three tens,' says Berkeley. 'Thought you was bluffing,' says the man. 'I was,' says Berkeley. And that's how he got the mine."

Malcolm frowned. "But if Berkeley had three tens, he wasn't bluffing," he said.

"Oh, yes, he was," chortled O'Mara. "The other man had stood pat."

In spite of himself, Malcolm smiled. He could see it as plainly as though he'd been there. Had Logan lost, he'd have laughed at himself and bought his opponent a drink.

But he hadn't lost. And right after that, his mine had gone from borrasca into bonanza.

Dealing with a man like Logan Berkeley, you had to figure him that way. And you had to figure him before he figured you. That, reflected Malcolm, would be a mighty good thing to remember in the days ahead.

IX

PROFESSOR BRUTUS CARMICHAEL'S Greater Amalgamated Shows opened at the Opera House on Friday night to a vociferously enthusiastic audience.

There had always been two great deficiencies in Virginia City: water and entertainment. In lieu of water, the majority of the residents happily substituted whisky; in the way of entertainment they took what they could get.

A typical cycle of entertainment at the Opera House brought Edwin Booth in a Shakespearean repertoire, *The Black Crook*, the Comstock's first out-and-out leg show, a battle between two wildcats and a bulldog in the course of which the wildcats chewed the scenery and a few of the hilarious spectators but kept out of range of the dog, an array of ponderous ladies in scant attire who called themselves the British Blondes, Lawrence Barrett in more Shakespeare, a bare-knuckle prize fight, an adequate light opera troupe, a dog-and-cat show, a faded poet in a series of lectures and readings from his own works, and now Professor Carmichael and his galaxy of more or less world-famous stars.

Whatever played the Opera House, or either of the other two lesser establishments catering to the amusement hunger of the populace, found itself blessed with capacity crowds. It was quite true that Messrs. Booth and Shakespeare could not compete with the dog-and-wildcat fight or even with the British Blondes, but they did very well indeed, thanks to higher admission charges. Of course, in the case of the animal battle there was a great deal of betting, and this feature was lacking in Mr. Booth's performances, although Dan De Quille asserted gravely on page 3 of the *Territorial Enterprise* that a considerable amount of money had changed hands on the outcome of the contest between Macbeth and Macduff. He also stated that this was what had caused a lively fracas just outside the theater immediately after the performance because some of the losers claimed that the winners had somehow managed to obtain inside information as to the outcome.

The Opera House was three stories high in front, and one in back. The audience crowded into the downstairs lobby, bought tickets at either of the two box offices, and walked up narrow winding stairs to

the orchestra level. The music was in the hands of Mom Carmichael, who shifted back and forth between piano and melodeon.

In addition to the orchestra chairs which accommodated most of the spectators, there was a small balcony, and up against the walls of the proscenium were four boxes. These were arranged so that their occupants could see very little of what transpired on the stage, but could be gazed upon by the audience. The boxes were held on an annual lease basis, and marked the leaseholders as being in bonanza.

Only two of the boxes were occupied on the night the Carmichael show opened. Seated alone on the left side of the stage was the quiet, compactly built, level-eyed John Mackay, who had started as a \$4-a-day miner, had worked as a superintendent on shares, had accumulated a stake, and who had bought the 94-foot Kentuck mine in Gold Hill and was reputed to be already worth millions (which was a gross exaggeration), and on the road to acquiring more millions. Mrs. Mackay, it appeared, was on one of her frequent trips to Europe, and therefore John Mackay was alone.

Across the house from him, also alone, but attracting more attention, was William Sharon, representative of the Virginia City agency of the Bank of California. Mr. Sharon was a slender, dapper, precise, sharp-eyed gentleman who was in a fair way to becoming known as the king of the Comstock, a title which flattered his ego immensely and which he did nothing to discourage. Certain persons in the audience looked from Sharon to Mackay and back again to Sharon. They fancied they detected a gleam in the shrewd eyes of the little banker, the sort of look an agile cat might bestow upon a particularly juicy morsel of mouse which has been backed into a corner.

Not, but what the two men failed to smile at each other. Outwardly they were the best of friends, though frequently Sharon had made derogatory remarks about John Mackay and his big bluff, boastful partner James Graham Fair. Fair was not among those present on opening night. He had left the Comstock, briefly, chasing a new discovery in Idaho; but he had been superintendent of the fabulous Ophir and, more recently, assistant superintendent of Hale & Norcross, which Sharon's Bank crowd had acquired, and there were those who felt sure that before too long he would be returning to Virginia City again to join forces with John Mackay. If and when there was to be a battle between Sharon and the Bank on the one hand, and Mackay and Fair on the other, the sympathies of the citizens would all be with the latter pair because they were both practical miners, whereas Sharon had become a power by the sharp and

unscrupulous use of the Bank's money, having been known to charge—when occasion demanded—as much as 12 per cent per month.

At any rate, the presence of Sharon and Mackay conferred an authenticity to the theatrical proceedings; it gave them a certain importance, like the attendance of European kings of old at knightly tournaments.

Otherwise, the audience was about what would have been found at almost any first night at the Opera House: a sprinkling of journalists, hundreds of miners clad in their inescapable flannel and blue denim and boots, a few wives and children (because great care had been taken to publicize the entertainment as "polite"), several mine superintendents, a few professional gamblers, at least two suave gentlemen who were vaguely suspected of earning their livelihood by the practice of highway robbery, and, inevitably, a moderate sprinkling of ladies from the red-light district on D Street. It was, for the most part, an orderly crowd, asking only to be amused, and prepared to adjust itself to whatever standard of entertainment might be purveyed.

Gregory & Marcella opened the show. During a melodeon solo by Mom which was listed on the program as "Overture," the slender, wiry Gregory Drake had stood close to his partner saying cruel and bitter things. There was no particular reason for a display of venom at that particular moment, except that Manny Hirsch, resplendent in blackface and gaily striped satin minstrel costume, was standing not too far away, listening. What he felt did not show through the burnt cork, but his dark eyes were heavy with sadness and bitter with futile anger.

But precisely on cue Gregory & Marcella became professionals. They moved onstage in a not too elaborate but technically sound softshoe routine, at the conclusion of which they were greeted with a generous round of applause. Thereupon they launched into their polite patter, and after that stepped through the intricacies of another dance. They took two bows and made their exit smiling. Gregory Drake was still smiling as he walked into the wings with his wife and called her a dirty bitch.

Manny Hirsch—Sambo—was next. He was a good trouper, and his broad grin as he walked onstage with his banjo had the audience with him from the beginning. Of course, there had to be a Sambo—there had to be a blackface banjo player with every variety show—but Manny was a cut above average for that part of the country.

He seated himself on the campstool, grinned at the audience, and began playing. He played fast and with flourishes and variations.

He gave them all the old familiar airs they expected and a few new ones.

Manny then fitted a contraption about his shoulders so that he could play a harmonica and still leave both hands free. He carried two pairs of bones, and those he rattled with the hands of a master. The crowd couldn't get enough of that, and he begged off by the simple expedient of grabbing his banjo a second time and finishing with a gay fast number. They definitely liked Sambo: they liked all the Sambos who ever had played the Comstock or who ever would play there.

Heinrich & Heide followed with their juggling act. They dressed well and had a definite dignity. They juggled gaily painted Indian clubs, tossing them back and forth to each other so that the paths they made looked like two animated rainbows; they juggled rubber balls and plates and then a combination of all of them. Thereafter they did a hoop-rolling routine which got across very well, and they wound up with the juggling of a half-dozen lighted lamps.

They were followed by Barbara Hamilton. The young lady was adequately clothed from the waist down, but she displayed a liberal expanse of bosom which seemed to interest the spectators even more than the sound of her husky contralto. She too sang the songs they wanted and expected, and she did two selections with tremolo effect so that the most sentimental and most inebriated among the spectators wept copiously and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Rudolph the Great came next. He affected a thin mustache and Mephistophelean make-up. He performed with the certainty that he was the best illusionist in the world, which he was not, though he was definitely good. He did sleight-of-hand, legerdemain, and prestidigitation, though where or how they varied, except in the number of letters, he did not explain. He wound up with two astonishing illusions and was rewarded with stupendous applause. It was the sort of reception which was meat and drink to Rudolph's soul, and he was a happy man when he left the stage.

Next on the bill was the Professor himself. This was the medicine pitch, and the Professor bounced onto the stage, resplendent in gay brocaded coat, tall hat, and a waistcoat which covered, but did not conceal, his fat little belly.

He charmed them with his frankness. He explained that the admission prices had been held down to a minimum because he hoped and expected to sell a great deal of his world-famous Elixir of Eternity, which he was offering at the special price of one dollar a bottle. He promised that it would cure all ailments, real or imaginary, and announced that his assistants would now pass through the au-

dience distributing his curative wares. He stated that the concoction was guaranteed, but just what the guarantee was he failed to state.

He was greeted vociferously, the claque being led by the miners who had met him on the previous night in various saloons along C Street. He told a few funny stories that really were funny, dazzled them with elaborate language, and promised to remain in Virginia City for a long, long time. And then, as the process of actually selling the medicine commenced, he supervised the placing of a great target board upstage so that when the knife-throwing act began the audience would get a clear view of Althea, who was the target.

It was Professor Carmichael himself who introduced Malcolm the Magnificent. Deftly, he transferred the focus of interest from himself to the young man who stepped out from the wings carrying a tray on which was a collection of heavy polished knives.

Malcolm wore trousers of plain black broadcloth, and a loose white linen shirt which was open at the throat. He looked quiet, confident, and impressive as he stood in the middle of the stage while the Professor finished his introduction. Then he gave his preliminary demonstration.

Placing a smaller target board on the left of the stage, and taking his position opposite, he set up a regular target and hurled knife after knife into the exact center of a red bull's-eye. His lithe figure moved easily and gracefully; you got the impression that he had absolute command over the weapons he used; he almost made it look easy.

He put objects on a table in front of the target board and pinned them to the board with his knives. He threw them in flocks, with incredible swiftness, and he threw them without appearing to look at his target. And then the small board was removed, and The Professor announced that the grand climax of the show had now been reached.

With an odd dignity for one so small and round and merry, the Professor stated that the young lady who would now risk her life by acting as target for Malcolm the Magnificent was his daughter. He was a shrewd man, the Professor, and he knew that his daughter was young and beautiful and that she would perform as target in a minimum of clothing. It was therefore essential that he should establish that what was about to take place was an exhibition of physical daring and not of sex. He then stepped into the wings and reappeared an instant later leading Althea by the hand. He took her to the center of the stage, gave her a courtly bow, and disappeared.

Althea wore a robe which covered her from throat to ankles. She looked incredibly young and beautiful as she stood bowing and smiling to the thunder of applause which cascaded across the footlights.

Her eyes were blue and bright, and her light-brown hair was held loosely by a bit of ribbon. She waited until the applause died down, and then she extended a hand to Malcolm. He took it and stood beside her, making her look smaller and younger than before.

He then moved downstage with her, and spoke into the abrupt hush. He invited four representative citizens, men known by their fellows and completely trusted, to step up on the stage to examine the knives which he intended to use.

Two men volunteered, somewhat bashfully; then another; then somebody yelled for John Mackay. Mackay's face flushed and he shook his head in violent negation, but the crowd had taken up the cry now and refused to take No for an answer. "You tell us them knives are real," someone yelled, "an' we'll take your word, John Mackay. Ain't nobody else hereabouts we'd trust all the way."

Malcolm sensed that the person called for was someone of importance. Mackay? John Mackay? Suddenly, he remembered. The Kentucky mine. Bonanza. The new Comstock millionaire. Holding Althea's hand, he crossed directly to Mackay's box. "Please," he said. "We need someone like you, Mr. Mackay."

John Mackay was a shy man. Big as he was, and as successful, he'd managed to keep pretty much in the background. He would have avoided going on the stage if he could graciously have done so, but now there was no escape. He left his box through the little door at the back, appeared in the orchestra, and walked up on the stage. The audience howled approval.

Malcolm introduced Althea to the four men. He conducted them to the table on which lay the gleaming knives, and invited them to take their time inspecting. The whole thing took only two or three minutes. A voice from the back of the auditorium cried, "They all right, John?" and Mackay turned and nodded and gave his slow, patient smile.

Malcolm seated his four judges against the right of the proscenium, requesting them to satisfy themselves that there was no substitution. Then he nodded to Althea.

She walked upstage to the big target board so that she was full in the glow of the footlights. Then, with a slow, graceful gesture, she reached up, untied the simple knot which bound the robe at her throat, shrugged her shoulders, and let it fall to the floor.

A gasp ran over the house. Perhaps here and there the spontane-

ous applause might have held a note of lechery, but for the most part the silence—and then the subsequent applause—was a sincere tribute from woman-hungry men to the glimpse of unspoiled youthful feminine beauty.

She was clad in sheer yellow tights and tiny gold slippers. Above the waist she wore a tight-fitting bodice of gold brocade. She wore a skirt a circus rider might have worn, reaching from her slender waist halfway down her thighs.

Someone, unnoticed by the spectators, stepped from the wings and removed Althea's robe. She stood quietly: smiling, confident, unafraid.

Then she walked to the board and pressed her back against it. She spread her arms wide and looked straight out at the audience. Silence had fallen over the auditorium now, a silence which was painful, almost tangible.

Althea said, softly, "I'm ready, Malcolm."

The young man was smiling. He moistened his lips and relaxed his muscles, seeking the coordination which was essential, without which fatal injury could occur.

Briefly, his eyes met Althea's. His were warm and eager. Then the warmth left them and they became cold with concentration. He shut the spectators out of his mind as well as out of his sight. There was no longer even Althea. She had become an outline pressed against a board, an impersonal thing. He did not think now of consequences should his aim prove less than true.

He balanced the first of the heavy knives, getting the feel of it. He looked at the girl but did not see her. He was estimating distance, the whirl of the knife; he was summoning the practice of years to his aid; and all the while his lips were smiling professionally and mirthlessly, and his eyes were like ice.

The knife flew from his hand, spun end over end, and buried itself deep in the board near Althea's right shoulder. The spectators sighed and braced themselves.

Another steel blade whirled through the air, then another and another. They dug viciously into the target board in slow, even cadence. They outlined her figure.

Her body never quivered, her eyes were unblinking.

Then the climax of the act. One, two, three, four, five, six—six knives outlining her head, stabbing into the board scant fractions of an inch away. And as the last one buried itself, Malcolm walked forward slowly, took her hand, turned, and led her to the footlights.

There came a few moments of silence, then a tremendous ovation. The spectators looked from the smiling, bowing young couple to the

pattern which the knives had made. It had been quite a show: the crowd was more than satisfied.

Mom struck up some gay music on the melodeon. A buzz of conversation arose. There was the sound of heavy boots scraping on the floor of the Opera House, and the movement toward the exits started. Still holding Althea's hand, Malcolm backed to midstage. The curtain dropped. The show was over.

X

BACKSTAGE THERE WAS the almost hysterical letdown which invariably follows first-night tension. The members of the troupe circulated in and out of dressing rooms, smiling rather fatuously at each other, saying pleasant things and temporarily forgetting past feuds.

Mom and the Professor, Althea and Malcolm, Heide Kramer and Manny Hirsch were gathered onstage, behind the curtain, chatting gaily, and it was there that Logan Berkeley found them.

He appeared from nowhere, tall and handsome and impetuous. His deep, pleasant voice said, "Malcolm Douglas!" Then a powerful hand clamped down on Malcolm's shoulder and spun him around. "You!" said Logan Berkeley. "You!" He grabbed Malcolm's right hand and wrung it. "Good God! I'm glad to see you."

Silence fell on the group. Althea was the first to understand, and she knew because Malcolm's face told her.

So this was Logan Berkeley! This was the young man who, according to rumor, was daily taking a young fortune out of a tiny mine. That was the thing of primary interest to Althea. Then came the awareness of Berkeley's masculinity, of the hard tall figure, of the bold reckless eyes, of the old saber scar which enhanced his good looks.

Malcolm was shaking Logan's hand. He was in the awkward position of being able to do nothing else. His hand had been captured; it was being crushed in a powerful grip.

It was an odd sensation. It was out of key with all the thinking he'd done about Logan Berkeley. He had rehearsed their meeting. It was to be at a time and a place selected by him, by Malcolm Douglas; it would be on neutral ground, or perhaps in Logan's territory—in the tiny confines of the Rattlesnake office, most likely; the approach would be made with quiet dignity, without censure, with-

out too great cordiality. *Logan, there are some things we must discuss, things that must be straightened out between us.* . . . It would have been fine that way; it would have warned Logan that they were meeting on new terms, that unfinished business must be completed—and satisfactorily—before a single gesture could be made toward reestablishing an old friendship.

But that wasn't the way things were happening. Logan had dropped Malcolm's hand and was now gripping his shoulders, flinging affectionate epithets at him, saying that he'd heard he was the Malcolm who was with the show but that he'd never believed it until he'd seen with his own eyes, demanding to know how Malcolm had dared to be in Virginia City for all of four—or was it five?—days without coming to see him.

It was Logan who dominated the scene, Logan who overwhelmed them with the force of his personality. All of Malcolm's fine thinking, all his delicate distinctions between morals and legality and ethics, vanished before the genuine pleasure, the warmth and friendship, which this man was displaying.

Malcolm had been shoved abruptly into a secondary spot. It was not, in theatrical parlance, his scene: it was Logan's scene, directed and paced by Logan, and it was so genuine, so unaffected, so—so *Loganish*, that there was nothing Malcolm could do about it.

He was saying the conventional things: "Mom, Althea, may I present Mr. Berkeley? Logan, this is Mrs. Carmichael. And her daughter, Althea." Althea's robe had come open, and perhaps even Althea did not know whether or not it was by design, but at the moment Logan seemed scarcely to notice the fresh young figure. "This is Professor Carmichael, Logan. And Heide . . ." The tall German girl had turned away, but Malcolm brought her back into the circle. "Mr. Berkeley—Miss Kramer. And this is Manny Hirsch, Logan." The two men clasped hands. Odd-looking, the extraordinarily tall and handsome Mr. Berkeley and the grotesque little blackface comedian still in his burnt cork and satin-striped minstrel habiliments.

Logan was affable and suave. Coufily phrases he'd almost forgotten sprang unbidden to his lips. He said gentle, flattering things to Mom, to Heide Kramer, to Althea, deftly choosing them in reverse order of their physical attractiveness. The South Carolina gentleman, transplanted to, but not affected by, the barren hills of Nevada. His voice was soft, and it slurred some of the words. It was the easy drawl of the Southerner, careless about pronunciation, meticulous about meaning.

He told them that he and Malcolm had been friends all their lives,

that they'd been raised together; he said that he hadn't understood why Malcolm hadn't looked him up the minute he'd gotten to town. He understood now, of course. In the company of three such attractive young ladies, Malcolm couldn't be expected to remember old friends. Mom looked straight at him and chuckled. "You Southerners never get out of practice, do you, Mr. Berkeley?"

"Surely, Mrs. Carmichael, you're not insinuating that—"

"I love it, Mr. Berkeley. I do, indeed. And to a friend of Malcolm's, I'm not Mrs. Carmichael at all, but Mom—same as to everybody else who knows me more than five minutes."

"Mom!" He bowed with exaggerated gallantry, smiling roguishly and detecting an answering, comprehending light in her eyes.

He swung on the Professor, doing the correct thing by instinct, saying a few nice things about the show, and then inviting them all to join him for a little supper at the International. The Professor accepted instantly, but Mom shook her head. "He's being polite, Brutus. He wants to talk to Malcolm."

Logan's eyes dwelt briefly on Althea. "I'll let you decide, Miss Carmichael."

She regarded him steadily. "That would hardly be fair, Mr. Berkeley."

"Why?"

"Because we're flattered by the invitation, we're hungry, we've never been inside the International . . . and we know that you ~~hate~~ have to ask us, but have been entrapped by your own courtesy."

"Mm-mm!" Logan straightened, looked down upon Althea with suddenly awakened interest. "You have an odd directness, Miss Carmichael."

"Aren't you accustomed to frankness?"

"No. It has always seemed socially inappropriate and generally unwise."

"Mining and war seem to have taught you delightful phrases, Mr. Berkeley."

"One can cover all sorts of meanings with careful words, Miss Carmichael. As for instance, I understand that you *will* go with us to the hotel, you do *not* find me distasteful; you will resent your Mother and despise Malcolm if they refuse my invitation. Am I right?"

"Yes. Quite right."

"Then we'll go, just as soon as you change clothes. All of us."

Heide Kramer flushed and said that she couldn't go, it was impossible. Logan took her hand gently. "That is most unfair, Miss Kramer. You see, if you refuse to join us, then you have wrecked

the party before it has even started. If you do not go—there will be no party."

"Mr. Berkeley! You carry your chivalry too far."

"Not far enough, Miss Kramer. You have heard my terms. I shall not alter them. You will join us?"

Heide hesitated, but Althea decided for her. The younger girl said: "Mr. Berkeley is just gentleman enough to mean what he threatens, Heide. You won't deprive us all of our little celebration, will you?"

Heide said she'd go. She was oddly flustered, this tall, lonely girl who had been so long without any attention of any sort. She was embarrassed, knowing why she had been included, yet—strangely enough—believing that upon her Yes or No the invitation to the others depended. Logan was a new sort of American for her to have met. And in so strange a place. Or was he an American? Heide was still a little vague about the late War Between the States, but she had—in the past few minutes—developed a fierce loyalty toward the survivors of a cause which so gallantly had lost.

As Logan and Malcolm and Manny Hirsch moved toward the dressing room which the two latter shared, the blackface comedian said, "I'd like to beg off, Mr. Berkeley—but I don't want to make you repeat that entire routine."

Berkeley laughed and clapped the little man on the shoulder. "Fine!" he said. "We won't repeat it. You'll go."

The dressing room was too small, actually, for two; it was congested by the trio. Logan stood against the wall, watching Manny Hirsch take off his make-up and costume, watching Malcolm Douglas. Logan's eyes were quietly speculative. There was something here which escaped him, something about Malcolm which he could not understand.

And, for that matter, there was a good deal about Malcolm which Malcolm could not understand. He felt as though he were progressing at the wrong speed on the wrong road. His preconceived ideas, his carefully arranged plans, meant nothing.

He was glad that Manny was with them in the dressing room. He wanted to talk to Logan, but he had to start thinking all over again. He needed more time. Logan's attitude had discomfited him: it held a spontaneity which did not blend with what Malcolm had expected it to be.

Yes, he intended to confer with Logan. He had spent all his spare time in Virginia City—every spare moment for the past several days—talking to whoever might have an opinion on his problem. He'd always presented it as a hypothetical case; he'd never mentioned

himself as one of the persons concerned, and he'd given no hint that Logan Berkeley was the other.

He had got exactly nowhere. There were two sides to the question: the legal and the unwritten grubstake laws. On the legal side, Brian Boru O'Mara had set him straight, and O'Mara was the one consultant whom he had trusted with names and dates and amounts.

"Legally," said O'Mara, "you haven't so much as a part of a leg to stand on, my boy. In Virginia City you have even less than that."

"What do you mean?"

"'Tis a grand new country we've got here, Malcolm, with a grand new way of interpreting law and administering justice. We have our own set of standards. We regard a judge as venal only when he sells out to both sides."

"Meaning . . ."

"That your friend Mr. Berkeley can buy a decision in his favor. You cannot be competing with him financially."

"He wouldn't do that."

"Nor would you, probably, even if you could. Which reduces the problem to strict legality. On that basis, me lad, he has you beaten. He tossed your grubstake money into a worthless bit of ground. When he became convinced that Big Cypress was hopelessly in borrasca, he wrote you all about it and sent you the deed to the mine. By legal standards his hands and his conscience were clean. What happened after that was the result of his own effort and wasn't based on any money you furnished him."

Malcolm said, "Miners I've talked to have said I'm entitled to half of anything Logan Berkeley may have acquired as the result of coming to the Comstock with the money I provided."

"Ah, yes, indeed. That's custom, Malcolm, me lad. Custom, but not law. And 'tis this I'm thinking: that this will be a thing to be settled by you and Mr. Berkeley, man to man, and mind to mind. 'Tis a question of right, perhaps, but not of law. 'Tis how you see it, and how he sees it. And, if it comes to that, it will narrow down to which can produce the greater power, because this you will learn about the Comstock, Malcolm: The only law here is the law of achievement. What you have the power to do is right."

And that was the way it had been. It had come down to a question of viewpoint, of how he thought and of how Logan Berkeley thought. Malcolm had tried putting himself in Logan's shoes, but he had been less than successful in the effort. The thing to do was to talk to the man, straight and fearlessly, to lay the cards face up on the table, to determine whether he—Malcolm Douglas—had been

deprived of his rights unjustly or whether he had been stripped of them merely because the law was on Logan's side.

Just before he and Manny finished dressing, Berkeley left the dressing room. Manny said, "Nice fellow."

"Very."

"I ain't intruding, Malcolm . . . but I've been hearing things. Is he the one?"

"Yes."

Manny shook his head. "A lot will depend," he prophesied, "on how right he thinks he is."

They finished their change and left the dressing room. They found the Professor and Mom and Heide Kramer. And off in a corner they saw Logan Berkeley and Althea.

Logan was leaning over her and laughing at something she had said. She was looking up into his eyes coquettishly—and with calculation.

XI

THEY ATE IN the small dining room at the International Hotel. They had steak and potatoes and salad and coffee, and, most importantly, they had oysters.

Actually, they didn't want the oysters, but Logan explained that they'd have to change their tastes. "To be a person of importance on the Comstock," he explained, "you've got to eat oysters. No matter how much you hate them, you've got to eat them. It's a mark of distinction. It denotes prosperity. Then, the next day, you must remark casually that you found the oysters rather good at the International or the Crystal or wherever."

Malcolm was watching him. Logan was definitely enjoying himself. He was giving his dissertation on oysters half seriously, half mockingly. "Those succulent bivalves," he went on, "were shipped upriver from San Francisco to Sacramento. They were freighted into the Washoe, packed snugly in ice. Of course, they're merely Western oysters, but are less likely to cause ptomaine poisoning."

Malcolm was smiling with the others. He didn't know how much to believe, how much to disbelieve. He had the impression that Logan was laughing at the gastronomic affectation of the Comstock, yet that he enjoyed subscribing to it in public. He had the feeling that had Logan been alone, he'd still have eaten oysters—not be-

cause he cared for them, but because it was the thing to do. That in itself marked a change in the man since the day they'd said good-bye to each other in San Francisco. The old Logan had abhorred ostentation, but Malcolm could not escape the conclusion that to this extent at least he was conforming to new standards.

Throughout the meal young Berkeley exerted his charm. By devoting himself almost exclusively to Mom Carmichael and Heide Kramer, he gave the impression of concentrating on Althea. And as for that young lady, she watched him with something close to fascination.

Eventually the supper ended. Logan offered to escort them to the mansion on A Street, but Mom insisted otherwise. Pop and Manny Hirsch would attend to that chore, she stated; she felt that Logan had been more than generous with his time and himself. She knew he wanted to chat with Malcolm. She led the way to the door.

They were all old friends by the time they said good night. They invited Logan to make himself at home backstage or at their luxurious boardinghouse; they begged him to consider himself one of them. And finally they trudged away, leaving Logan and Malcolm side by side in the doorway of the hotel.

Logan walked back into the lobby, drawing Malcolm after him by the sheer force of his personality. He seated himself in an easy chair in a moderately secluded corner and motioned Malcolm to the chair opposite. He lighted a cigar and offered one to Malcolm, and then, when they had inhaled the first puffs, his black eyes met Malcolm's gray ones.

"What's it all about, Malcolm?" he asked.

The smaller man did not pretend to misunderstand. He said, "I don't know how to explain things, Logan."

"Why?"

"Because what I've got to say could sound like a suggestion that you haven't played fair with me."

"Is that how it's supposed to sound?"

Malcolm's eyes narrowed, but they didn't evade. He said simply, "I don't know."

He saw Logan's face flush slightly, then observed a thin smile. That in itself was a far cry from the old days. His thoughts darted back to the early sixties, when the remotest suggestion that any act of any Berkeley could be subject to scrutiny would have resulted in a challenge to a duel. And now . . . well, yes, things had changed: the man had changed. Yet Malcolm, not knowing that, had taken the direct course, understanding that he might well be inciting the anger of a dangerous man.

"What don't you know, Malcolm?" Berkeley's voice was quiet.

"I don't know how far to credit any of the things I've heard about you during the few days I've been in Virginia City. I've learned already that everything is exaggerated here, so maybe the stories of your success have been exaggerated too."

"They have been." Logan's eyes were unwavering. "But the truth is still fantastic. I own a mine called the Rattlesnake. It is a small mine, but it is in bonanza. I am rapidly becoming a wealthy man."

Malcolm said, "You own the mine?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't check with my understanding of our agreement when you left San Francisco."

Logan's smile broadened. "You know about that, Malcolm. Our money went down a shaft I called Big Cypress. One hundred per cent borrasca. I sent you a deed of sole ownership. Then I went to work as an ordinary miner—and a not very good one. Four dollars per day. Quite a difference from the old South Carolina life, wouldn't you say?"

"Quite." That's what Malcolm said, keeping his voice flat. But he was thinking that it was incredible.

"I worked like a dog. I saved. I built up a small stake. I played poker. The money grew. One night I found myself lucky. Then more lucky. I wound up owning a supposedly worthless mine over in Gold Hill. I worked it myself. I found a part of the vein which came in from the Yellow Jacket. After that, things were simple."

He stopped. It had all been said. Malcolm matched his directness.

"You came to the Comstock as my partner, Logan. It would seem that anything which resulted from that trip would be half mine."

"You're not serious."

"I'm serious enough. Oh, I understand the legal side of it. But there is such a thing as custom. I've talked to practical mining men, to prospectors, and to men who have grubstaked prospectors. I haven't mentioned names, but I've drawn the picture clearly. They consider that I am entitled to half of whatever profit your trip to the Comstock may have yielded."

"That," stated Berkeley reasonably, "is an absurdity. I shall not be influenced by the sentimental ravings of a lot of unwashed, illiterate laborers."

"The custom of the country—"

"With all due respect, Malcolm, to hell with that. Right is right and wrong is wrong. Custom has nothing to do with it. There's no in-between. If people have been stuffing you with those false doctrines, the best thing you can do is to readjust yourself. What was

left of our partnership you've got: a title deed to Big Cypress. What I now own, I myself earned. Every damned dollar of it."

"We don't look at it the same way."

Logan's eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward. "Do you question my account of what happened?"

"No. I do not, and never could, question your honor. I accept your story. I still disagree with your conclusion."

Some of the tenseness went out of Logan's figure. He relaxed and smiled. "Let's not beat around any bushes, Malcolm. I know what you're thinking, so you might as well know where I stand. The Rattlesnake and everything to which it may lead is mine. Our partnership ended when I sent you the deed to Big Cypress."

"I credit you with being sincere. I judge that you have been in financial difficulty or you wouldn't have joined a theatrical troupe in order to get to the Comstock. As a friend, I'll let you have any amount of money you want. I'll cheerfully buy back Big Cypress for the \$1,500 you invested in our partnership, or for any amount you think is reasonable. If you want to stay here, I'll give you a job. I'll see that you learn something about mining. But I will not give you a two-bit piece on the grounds that it is yours by right. Is that clear?"

"Yes. It's clear." Malcolm's eyes were cold. "But not satisfactory. Either I'm entitled to half or I'm entitled to nothing. I won't compromise."

Logan said softly: "Well, I'll be damned. You make that sound like a threat."

"No-o. I wouldn't be so foolish as to threaten you. I merely want you to know what's on my mind, what I truly believe."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I haven't figured that, either. But as long as I see things as I now see them, I shall try to do something."

Logan was silent for a while. He leaned back in his chair, stretched his long legs, and puffed smoke rings toward the ceiling. "Somebody," he said softly, "has been giving you the wrong sort of education, Malcolm. You'll never be able to do anything, because there's nothing to be done. And I'm sorry you put things the way you did, because you've tied my hands."

"What does that mean?"

"I might have made a gesture. Mind you, I don't really believe I would have—but it was possible. Now it isn't."

"I'm not asking charity. I want what's mine. If it isn't mine, I wouldn't touch it."

"What's yours, you've got. Big Cypress. I've offered to take it off your hands."

"I prefer to keep it. Perhaps," and Malcolm's lips twisted somewhat sardonically, "perhaps it's worth that much to me to own something named Big Cypress."

Their thoughts flashed across the miles and years to a gracious plantation in South Carolina, a plantation called Big Cypress. It was Logan Berkeley who returned to practicality. He said: "We're really off on the wrong foot, Malcolm. If it were anyone other than you, I could be rather angry."

"I haven't asked you to make any difference in my case."

"You're all heated up about an imaginary grievance. All right, so I'll accept that fact. What do we do now?"

"What does that mean?"

"Are we friends?"

Malcolm took his time about answering. "You seem to hint that if we're not friends, we'd necessarily be enemies."

"You're putting words in my mouth."

"I don't know what we are, Logan. There's bound to be a restraint between us: you'd always be knowing what I was thinking."

"Which is . . ."

"That you're legally right and morally wrong."

"Convince me of that, and you'll get what you want."

"I know. Perhaps it is that we weren't trained to think the same way; we started life differently."

Logan Berkeley made a gesture of impatience. "Can't you realize that that's over and done with, Malcolm? The way we were raised is a manner of life that doesn't exist any more. Most particularly, it doesn't exist out here in Nevada. Out here I haven't even the impulse to make a gallant, and foolish, gesture. You'll get the same feeling if you stay on the Comstock long enough."

"I'll stay."

"And . . ." Logan hesitated, then went on. "I ask again: Are we friends?"

"My answer is still the same. I don't know."

"I've been invited to see more of the people in your troupe. I like those I've met. I've been lonely here. But I don't wish to intrude."

"You're welcome, Logan. If I ever see things any other way, I'll tell you. You've changed, you know. I haven't quite figured how much."

"It's a new land, Malcolm. You conform to it, or you go under."

"I'll never go under."

"No-o, I don't believe you will. And now, I suppose it's useless to repeat my offer of any help you might need."

"Quite."

Logan rose and Malcolm followed. They walked through the front door and faced each other. Logan held out his hand. "Good night, Malcolm."

Malcolm took the hand.

"Good night, Logan."

Their clasp was firm, their eyes level. They walked off in opposite directions, without a backward glance.

Malcolm was confused and disturbed.

But Logan Berkeley was not confused. He never had been and never could be. To him, life was a straight line, and he followed the straight line without question.

Their thoughts, however, were similar in one respect: Each recognized that this was not the end of something, but the beginning.

XII

THE MEMBERS OF the troupe ate breakfast the next day at 1:00 P.M. A half-hour later Althea Carmichael and Malcolm Douglas left the mansion and started up the precipitous sides of Mount Davidson.

The sunshine was startling in its brilliance. They picked their way carefully, avoiding the tarantulas and deadly sidewinders about which they had been warned, moving around boulders and stepping over rocks.

"Althea moved easily and gracefully. She looked very youthful, very charming, very desirable." Malcolm climbed with the easy coordination of the outdoorsman, holding his pace down to hers. The ascent was not easy, and they did not talk until they reached the summit. Their hearts were pounding. They did not know that they were feeling the effects of the altitude, and they experienced a tiredness which seemed out of all proportion to the effort they had made. Seating themselves gratefully on a boulder, they absorbed a view which was magnificently hideous. And after a long while, when the action of their hearts had returned to something like normal, when their breathing was less labored, Althea introduced the subject that was uppermost in her mind. She did it with characteristic directness.

"You and Mr. Berkeley discussed your problem last night, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What did you decide?"

"Nothing."

She waited patiently. He started at the beginning and told her all he remembered of the conversation. When he finished she asked, "What do you intend to do, Malcolm?"

"I can't answer that. It depends . . ."

"On what? On something you already know? Logan Berkeley is obviously cheating you out of a share that is rightfully yours."

"He may be," admitted Malcolm. "But that isn't the way he sees it."

She made an impatient gesture. "I don't know anything about your past, Malcolm; yours and Berkeley's. But he's got you hoodwinked. You feel he's wrong, but you won't admit it. He's taking advantage of that."

"I don't believe so."

"Because you're blind. You swallow his fine speeches about there being no middle course, about right being right and wrong being wrong. Well, I haven't been here on the Comstock any longer than you have, but I've learned more. I've talked to Father and to Mr. O'Mara and to the stage manager at the Opera House who came out here as a prospector. They all think you're entitled to half of whatever Logan Berkeley owns."

"Suppose I am," he said quietly. "Just how would you suggest going about getting it?"

She looked at him in surprise. "You're not a weakling, Malcolm; you're certainly not a coward. I understand that it is customary for men to fight for what belongs to them."

He smiled and touched her hand. "You'd like me to own half his mine, wouldn't you, Althea?"

"No. But I'd like to see you own what is rightfully yours. I hate to see you sit back and accept his righteous verdict. Why did you come to Virginia City in the first place? To be a monkey in a zoo?" She gazed at him levelly for a few moments before going on. "What does Logan Berkeley do to you, Malcolm?"

He frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

"For some reason, you're overawed by the man. I can't explain it, but it shows in every word you speak about him. As though he were a king and could do no wrong."

Malcolm had a flash of self-revelation. She made him see something of which he himself had not been aware. He gazed upon her with new respect.

She was an odd offshoot of an unusual couple, this Althea Carmi-

chael. In some ways she was hopelessly childish, in other ways as mature as she would ever be. She could be outwardly charming and inwardly hard and calculating. But mostly, he was astounded by her powers of perception. And her way of expressing them.

She had a sketchy, superficial education, snatched piecemeal through seventeen years of hand-to-mouth existence. The basis had been imparted by her mother, who read whenever she had time and whatever she could find. But whereas Mom read for escape, Althea's mind was a sponge. It absorbed bits of knowledge, pigeonholed them, retained those which might possibly be of use.

And because of that, she was a source of continual amazement to Malcolm Douglas. He looked at her and thought of her parents, recalled what he knew of them. She was a young and beautiful contradiction.

Brutus Carmichael—the professor—was no more and no less than he appeared on the surface to be. He was short and pudgy and jolly and energetic and lazy. He had been born in Trenton, New Jersey, on the fifth day of May, 1826. Hating hard work, he was nevertheless a terrific worker, but he had the happy faculty of ignoring tasks which he did not wish to perform. He was pompous, generous, and thoroughly irresponsible, a true traveling showman.

Back in 1850, when he had owned a single-wagon medicine show which was too small to carry the adjectives "great" or "amalgamated," he had been struggling along near St. Louis and had met a blond, buxom, oddly attractive, clear-eyed young lady named Anna Schultz. Anna had been born in 1830 and was therefore just four years Brutus's junior. She was a good, practical, healthy daughter of a stolid farmer. She was an expert housekeeper, and adept at plain and fancy needlework, millinery, sewing, cooking, and nursing. She had been reared to be the perfect wife for a farmer, and not at all the kind of girl who would have been attracted to—or who should have caught the attention of—any fly-by-night person such as the Professor.

Yet they did meet, and nature being what it is, they fell in love. They married, and Mom moved on with the show, taking over as though she'd been raised in its atmosphere. She understood her husband, handled him deftly, ministered to his material and emotional wants and made him a perfect wife. And on the fifteenth of June, 1851, somewhere in the vicinity of Springfield, Illinois, she had presented an astonished Brutus with a daughter whom they named Althea. From the beginning Brutus had adored—but never understood—the baby, and the same still held true. While Mom could make her husband believe that he was boss of the outfit, even Bru-

tus could not delude himself to that extent where Althea was concerned.

Only Mom had made it possible for Althea's character to form in any approximation of a proper way. Whereas the Professor understood nothing at all about his daughter, Mom understood everything. She had never been fooled by Althea's charm—a quality which was turned on and off at will; she had never been blind to her daughter's willfulness or the unswerving tenacity with which Althea—even as a little girl—went after anything she considered worth having.

From the beginning Mom had known that there were fine qualities in Althea, and that they were also dangerous qualities. The little girl was generous, miserly, unselfish, selfish, trusting, calculating, sentimental, hard. It depended upon what Althea wanted. Mom had long since recognized that she couldn't change Althea's character basically; what she therefore concentrated on was the task of instilling in the girl the right sort of ambition, a proper sense of values, a natural decency.

Althea's ethics were oddly assorted. They were strictly plural in her case: one ethic to fit this situation, another ethic for that. She must be honest, yet she had heard her father—yes, and even her mother, when conditions were desperate—lying in order to avoid the attachment of their show by importunate creditors. She must never try to fool people, yet she had heard her father explaining to her mother that Professor Carmichael's Elixir of Life would not do even a single per cent of all the things he claimed for it, although it would do no harm, either.

And so in the years when she was a childish adult, in the years when they moved westward and ever farther westward, when she should have been playing with other children but knew no other children to play with, when there should have been school and Sunday school but wasn't, when she had learned to keep her own counsel, think her own thoughts, make her own plans—in those years Althea Carmichael had developed into a contradiction which was not a contradiction at all but the inevitable outgrowth of circumstance and environment.

Althea's approach to life was direct and simple. If you wanted something, you strove to get it. You didn't wait for it to drop into your lap, because life wasn't set up that way. You saw your goal clearly and walked steadily toward it. Maybe you achieved it, maybe you didn't, but you never altered your purpose. Even in failure the goal was still there, giving a purpose to everything you did, everything you thought.

Her mind functioned in straight lines. She was not physically

afraid because fear did not pay dividends. She was intolerant of weakness in others, although she did not let weak persons annoy her. She was sexually virtuous because virtue was a commodity which brought in the open market a much higher price than promiscuity.

Indecision she could not understand or tolerate, and that was why she was impatient with Malcolm Douglas.

From the first, she had liked him. She had sensed in him a superior quality, superior certainly to those who had drifted into her life. He was quiet, he was forceful, he was—certainly by her standards—intellectual. What she couldn't understand was his apparent vacillation. He'd journeyed to the Comstock with a purpose in mind. But that purpose seemed less definite now that he had encountered Logan Berkeley.

Berkeley, she understood. She had begun to understand him the previous night; she understood him even better now that Malcolm had told of their interview.

Logan Berkeley, too, had fled from a devastated land; he, too, had sought a new country; he had left the comparative ease of San Francisco to join the battle for material wealth which was being waged in the Comstock. He had gambled and lost. He had started over and gambled again, and won. She had the feeling that if he had lost a second time, he would have made a third attempt, and, if necessary, a fourth and a fifth and a sixth.

There was something buried in the past of these two young men that she didn't know. She had sensed it the previous night when she'd first met Logan, and all through the ostentatious meal at the International. The same feeling came upon her with greater force on the mountain as Malcolm talked. It was as though, in telling her that Logan had been wrong, he was also saying that Logan could do no wrong.

He was speaking, almost as though to himself:

"You think I'm weak, Althea, because I ask a practical question. I say I'm willing to fight for what I believe is mine. But I ask you—I ask myself—how do I go about doing this fighting? Certainly physical combat between Logan and myself would mean nothing and accomplish even less. I understand that legally my case has no standing even if there were not so much venality to contend with in the courts here, even if I could afford the luxury of litigation. How, then, would I fight? What would be the purpose of fighting?"

She had risen and was looking down at him. She was observing a strong man who did not talk with the voice of strength. She said, in a voice in which affection and pity and contempt were oddly in-

termingled: "There wasn't much purpose in the fighting you did for four years, was there, Malcolm? You've said yourself that you never believed you could win. But you fought. Wasn't that something in itself?"

"It was a course that others directed for me, Althea. This situation is by no means as simple."

"So you'll sit idly by—"

"And do nothing? For the time being, yes. Until I learn more about this new land, until I satisfy myself how I would have acted had my position and Logan's been reversed."

She said abruptly, "I know how you would have acted."

"You do?" He was startled, then amused.

"You'd have welcomed Mr. Berkeley. You would have made a great show of presenting him with half your mine."

Malcolm flushed. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe to prove your nobility. But that's what you would have done, I'm sure of it."

He clambered to his feet and put both hands on her shoulders. He was laughing to hide a very genuine exasperation.

"You little vixen," he said. "You should be spanked."

"Why?"

"Because you point out things about my character which bewilder me, and you don't suggest a cure. You're much too young to be so smart."

Her eyes softened. She moved close to him. "I'm not smart, Malcolm. But I know you. I guess you're the only friend I've ever had. I'm fond of you."

She was gazing at him with odd intensity. He felt deeply stirred. Far back in some remote corner of his brain there was the feeling that he should be shocked, that Althea was being forward and unmaidenly. But it wasn't that, and he knew it. It was the ineluctable honesty which was the basis of their relationship.

She said, "Would you like to kiss me, Malcolm?"

He smiled, and drew her to him easily and naturally. His lips found hers, and her arms crept about his neck.

And then he felt her body straining against his, her lips eager and hungry, her arms holding him in a clasp which he never wanted to break.

It was as though a rocket exploded within him, filling him with ecstasy. His own arms tightened until it seemed that they must crush her. For perhaps half a minute their passion was naked and unashamed, and then he released her suddenly and stepped back.

overcome by emotions never before experienced. He said, "Althea . . ." and the word came from dry lips.

"Now," she said, "now you know."

He felt shy and awkward. He said, "Your folks . . ."

"They won't be knowing how deeply we feel, Malcolm. Nobody will know except the two of us." She came close to him again, but this time she neither gave nor invited caresses. "What just happened, Malcolm, tells us something, but it doesn't change anything. And look at you . . ." She laughed, and there was kindness in her laughter. "You're trying to be shocked. You've been taught to be shocked when two people can kiss like that and not immediately plan to marry. Well, you mustn't be shocked, Malcolm, because that isn't the way things are." She seemed strong and happy and sure of herself. "There are all kinds of new laws and customs in Virginia City, my dear. Aren't we entitled to make a few of our own?"

XIII

TWO DAYS LATER—fifty-eight hours, to be exact—Malcolm met Deborah Cortland.

He had seen her first when he'd peeped out at the audience from the wings while Manny Hirsch was purveying blackface entertainment as Sambo. Except that she was sitting in the first row sketching busily, he would have paid no attention. She wasn't alone—there was a hulking giant of a man sitting beside her—but there was nothing, at first glance, to mark her as different from any other young woman except that she was unusually attractive. Malcolm was still a newcomer to Virginia City, but he'd long since learned that there was a dearth of attractive young women—or of women of any sort, for that matter.

The odd thing about her, he reflected, was that she was attracting no attention. Busy with sketch pad and pencil, she would ordinarily have caught the attention of those seated nearest her. Instead, save for a casual glance or two, she appeared to be taken for granted.

She was a brunet, with serious dark eyes and a well shaped head. Her hair was black, and though she wore a modish little flat hat tipped over one eye it was not—as was usual—laden with simulated fruits and flowers. She was working with such concentration that Malcolm found it difficult to guess her age, but he judged it to be in the early twenties.

She excited his curiosity. In his mind she was an artist, since he knew very little about art in any of its practical forms and took it for granted that anyone who drew pictures was an artist. What he couldn't understand was what she saw of interest in the wizened, grotesque personality of a Sambo in burnt cork with his grin, his banjo, and his artificially big lips.

He continued to watch her as the show progressed. She sketched the Kramers, and he wondered why Male and female jugglers: nothing unusual about them. Later, when he appeared on stage for the commencement of his own act, he observed that she was again sketching busily. At the conclusion of the knife throwing act, he saw her put her sketches into a portfolio and start from the theater followed by her escort.

After the show Malcolm went downtown alone. There was so much, he wanted to think about, so much he needed to learn. The night was violent and unseasonably chilly. He turned in at a long, narrow bar and ordered a drink.

The place was crowded, which was nothing unusual. The vast majority of the patrons were miners. They drank earnestly, talked loudly, laughed raucously. Against the side and back walls there were the usual tables for gambling: faro, monte, and draw poker. It was a rough masculine spot: a place where violence could easily happen, and often did. A crowded room filled with the odor of bad whisky and bad cigars. Malcolm tossed off his drink, paid for it, and turned to go. It was then that the girl entered.

The sight of her came as a shock. Women were not permitted in bars. True, a few of the drinking places had side doors leading to back rooms, doors which were inscribed "Family Entrance," but no lady ever used them. Prostitutes, yes, ladies, no. And even a prostitute would not have dared walk through the front door of a saloon and seat herself casually on a stool at the end of the bar.

But more astonishing than her presence in the place was the attitude of the patrons. They seemed to take her for granted. The bartender waved and grinned at her, and she waved back. A couple of miners raised whisky glasses to her as though drinking a toast.

She opened her portfolio, took out sketch pad and pencils, and sat there solemnly looking about the room. Malcolm watched her with mounting curiosity. The whole thing was out of focus; it didn't belong in a saloon, in Virginia City or anywhere else.

Obviously there was at least one other patron who also didn't understand, because he said something to the bartender and Malcolm saw that dignitary point proudly at something that hung back of the bar, blocking out part of the mirror.

It was a framed crayon sketch of the bartender. It showed a bright, merry person . . . yet the artist had caught something, an elusive quality which seemed to make the drawing important. The sketch told Malcolm more about the bartender than he'd seen by looking at the man himself. It showed eyes that were hard and uncompromising and unafraid, the eyes of a man who was accustomed to violence as an occupational hazard, who had trigger-quick reactions, who was professionally genial but potentially dangerous.

Malcolm's observant eyes saw that much. He saw, too, that the bartender was proud of his portrait. He noticed that no man in the place molested the girl, even with his eyes, and he had the feeling that to do so might not prove healthy.

She attracted him. As a person, he was sure he'd have noticed her; as a young lady so obviously at ease in an atmosphere where she did not belong she constituted a challenge. She couldn't be classified. Her easy camaraderie was almost masculine, yet she was overwhelmingly feminine.

She was a lady of culture and refinement, of that Malcolm was certain. Clear, wide-set eyes, high forehead, generous, full-lipped mouth, the slightest—almost incongruous—suggestion of a dimple; the air of being there as a matter of right and yet of not belonging.

Malcolm Douglas determined to satisfy his curiosity. He put his whisky glass back on the bar and approached the young lady. He bowed and said, "Pardon me," and instantly a powerful hand clamped down on his shoulder with a grip that made him wince. He whirled to face the heavy face of the big man who had sat alongside the girl in the theater.

Malcolm's eyes turned the color of ice. He said quietly, "Take your hand off me."

"Move!" The bar had grown quiet suddenly. The bartender moved in their direction, two or three other men did the same. Malcolm felt danger. His right hand slipped under his coat where he always carried one of his throwing knives in lieu of the pistol which seemed conventional attire. He experienced no fear, only an alertness.

Then the girl's voice cut through the heavy smoke of the room. She said, "That's all right, Gus," and though the bodyguard looked at her skeptically he relaxed the pressure of his hamlike hand on Malcolm's shoulder. The bartender and his customers stopped their converging movement, but they didn't retreat. They stood motionless, poised, waiting.

The girl's eyes sought Malcolm. She seemed to be amused and perhaps even slightly derisive. "You're Malcolm the Magnificent, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." His voice was quiet, unafraid. "Is this man with you?" He referred to Gus.

"Yes."

"Would you mind telling him to remove his hand?"

"Certainly." She smiled at the bodyguard. "The gentleman is quite harmless, Gus." Then, to Malcolm, "I think it would be well if you removed your own hand, Malcolm the Magnificent."

A slow smile creased his lips. He dropped his hand to his side and stepped away as Gus released his grip. The girl said, "Gus is in constant fear that I shall be insulted."

Malcolm said that he'd had no such intention, and she accepted his statement. "May I ask your name?" the girl inquired.

"Malcolm Douglas, ma'am."

"Mine is Cortland, Deborah Cortland. This—" and she smiled at her bodyguard—"is Gus Dunbar." Malcolm nodded and said, "How-doyoudo." Gus merely grunted. The bartender and customers shrugged and returned to their original places.

Malcolm said: "I reckon I owe you an apology, ma'am. My curiosity got the better of me. I saw you at the Opera House tonight during the show. You seemed—well, unusual. Then when I saw you walk in here and make yourself so much at home . . ."

"I understand, Mr. Douglas. I am regarded as rather eccentric. I'm at ease in practically any place except where I should be at ease." She smiled straight at him, and he was astounded by her graciousness and warmth. "Southern, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Were you in the Confederate Army, by any chance?"

"I reckon I was, ma'am. Does that make any difference to you?"

"My goodness, Mr. Douglas, there's quite a bit of presumption wrapped up in that question, isn't there? But permit me to answer. No, it makes not a particle of difference. I'm from New York. I've been in Virginia City approximately six months. I like it here. In New York I found it impossible to do the things I wished to do. Here I find it permissible by the simple method of making it so. I do what I wish. I do not debate the right and wrong of it; I do not ask myself whether or not it is socially correct, and—because this is the Comstock—because I do not question myself, no one else questions me."

He studied her carefully. Then once again he grinned. "How would you make out without your bodyguard, Miss Cortland?"

"Quite well. He's not mine, really, you see. He appointed himself. Why don't you have another drink, Mr. Douglas? You look as though you might enjoy one."

"Thanks, ma'am. I will. . . ." He hesitated, and she shook her

head. "You're right, Mr. Douglas," she said "I have to draw the line somewhere, so I never drink in the bars which I frequent in search of things to sketch. Just as I do not practice prostitution, even though I've visited certain establishments on D Street to do a little drawing."

Malcolm frowned. He'd never heard that kind of talk from a decent woman. It was as though she were trying to shock him. He said, "You're joking, surely."

"No, indeed. I'm neither joking nor trying to startle you. I sketch professionally. My work appears fairly regularly in *Harper's* and *Leslie's*. I have always had a certain facility for catching unusual facets of the rougher side of life. Virginia City seemed to afford me exceptional opportunity. That was how I met Gus."

Malcolm waited, knowing that she'd go on.

"Gus is a classic type. No, don't smile. I'm serious. He's magnificently primitive. I saw him one night in a saloon. I did a sketch of him. I liked it so well that I elaborated it into a portrait. I don't do many portraits, but I couldn't resist Gus. That portrait was reproduced in *Harper's*, and I then had it returned here and presented it to Gus. You'll find it hanging in the Crystal bar, which is the finest establishment on C Street. Gus has therefore acquired a definite prestige, and I have more or less acquired Gus. He is not with me always—or even frequently—but he seems to know when I'm some place he believes might be less than safe—and there he is, to protect me."

Malcolm nodded at Gus and invited him to have a drink. Mr. Dunbar shook his head. "Never touch it when I'm with Miss Cortland," he said.

"You see, Mr. Douglas, I am a good influence." She threw back her head and laughed. "You think I've been exaggerating, don't you?"

Malcolm said carefully, "I don't know what to think. I never met an artist before. At least—well—"

"Not a lady who frequents saloons, bawdy houses, mine shafts, amusement places, and the scenes of disasters? Of course you haven't. And I'm not really an artist, Mr. Douglas. I have a certain facility, an ability to recognize raw drama and to put it down on paper. I am also escaping from something, as you may have guessed."

"From what?"

"That could be regarded as impertinent."

"It isn't. You invited me to ask you."

She regarded him with new interest. "Correct. All right then, here's your answer. I'm escaping from stuffy conventionality, from all the things I was taught to regard as important. It's been quite a

journey, and I haven't yet reached my goal. I probably never shall. But the flight itself has been fun."

He said, with a directness which surprised him, "When I first noticed you tonight, you were sketching Manny Hirsch."

"Who?"

"Manny Hirsch, Sambo, our banjo player. Would you mind telling me why?"

She said, "I'll show you." She dug into her portfolio and produced a sketch.

It was rough, but it was superb. At first glance it was a grotesque little minstrel, nothing more; but as Malcolm studied it something else began to emerge: a lost, forlorn soul, a tragic victim of nonfulfillment. There was a big grin on Sambo's lips, and a sadness in his eyes which carried back forty centuries; there was resignation and there was courage; there was understanding and there was bewilderment.

This was the Manny Hirsch that Malcolm knew, the Manny Hirsch that was locked up in a small, weak body. He drew a deep breath and looked up at Deborah Cortland.

"I don't know how to express it," he said softly, "but you have performed a miracle."

Her cheeks flushed. She said, "You couldn't have paid me a greater compliment, Mr. Douglas." She took the sketch from him and studied it. "Did I interpret correctly?"

"Better than even Minny would know I'm rather at a loss for words."

"So am I." She hesitated, then said impulsively: "It isn't often I meet someone who sees beneath the surface of my drawing. Or rather, let us say that he sees but doesn't trouble to analyze. Our bartender friend likes the sketch I did of him, but he doesn't quite know why he likes it. About the only positive emotion I ever excite is dislike."

He looked his query and she went on:

"I have a small independent income. I couldn't support myself on what I get from my work. Soon after I got here, when my reputation had spread all the way from the Ophir to the Yellow Jacket, I was commissioned to do a portrait of a most estimable lady, the respectable wife of a successful mine superintendent. I did what I am certain was an excellent piece of work. I delivered it to her, and my judgment was confirmed when she promptly burned the portrait and refused to pay me."

"Caricature?" he asked.

"No. Portraiture. I'm afraid the good lady hadn't really wanted that. What she desired was glorification."

Malcolm said, "How long will you be here, Miss Cortland?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. There's a tension and excitement here, an air of uncertainty. If that ever becomes humdrum, I'll go somewhere else."

He said quietly: "I've never met anyone like you—as a person, I mean. I'd like to see you again."

"You shall. You may even walk me home if you wish."

"I'd be most happy, ma'am."

She collected her papers, closed her portfolio. Then she said suddenly, "I'd like to do a study of the little lady you work with."

"Althea? I'm sure she'd be delighted. But why?"

Deborah chose her words carefully. "Because," she said at length, "your Althea is interesting. There's so very much more to her than appears on the surface. I'd consider myself fortunate to be able to catch it."

XIV

THOUGH VIRGINIA CITY in 1868 furnished wealth to the world, it was utterly dependent upon the world for subsistence.

The rocky, barren area surrounding the Comstock Lode produced nothing upon which it could live. Nothing grew there: there was no animal life, there were no factories, there was not even a proper water supply.

Food had to be freighted in, and water and whisky and clothes and wood for construction and for fuel. Fruits and vegetables came from California, fish and game from the Sierras. There was nothing in Virginia City of which the residents could say, "This was grown here, this was made here, this we have produced." Nothing, that is, except gold and silver.

But those metals were basic wealth, and they were sent from the mines to the mills and there reduced to powder and molded into bars. The bars were shipped out to San Francisco, and because they were real and tangible they generated a feverish excitement. People speculated in the stocks of the mines which had produced the ingots of tangible wealth, and the extent and direction of their speculation had very little relation to the actual production of the mines themselves.

There was more activity in Comstock mines on Montgomery Street, San Francisco, than there was on C Street in Virginia City. Stocks skyrocketed on rumors, and plummeted on adverse tidings, with none of which was fact closely related. And men who were unscrupulous and shrewd journeyed into the Washoe to manipulate the natural wealth of the land, to acquire it for themselves, not with pick and shovel and drill and giant powder, but by playing upon the avarice and cupidity of men, and upon the controlled fluctuation of fortune.

They were not prospectors or miners; they gave nothing and they took everything. They loaned money to mine owners when the owners were in desperate need; they imposed impossible terms and foreclosed when the fantastic interest could not be paid. They acquired controlling interests in mines and deliberately restricted the production of those mines, all the while levying assessments on stockholders, squeezing them out, then acquiring the shares at rock-bottom figures.

They spread rumors of bonanza when a mine was in borrasca, forcing prices up and enabling them to sell worthless stock at incredible profit; they acquired control of the basic commodities which were needed on the Comstock if people were to live and the mines to operate; they controlled food and water and transportation and heat and light; they controlled courts and judges, and the least of the iniquities which they clothed in the habiliments of legality was their successful efforts to make justice too expensive for the little man. They could crush him because they could afford to fight and he could not, because they controlled the machinery of the law and the decisions of those who sat on the Bench.

Throughout the sixties there was endless, expensive litigation. It mattered not to the lawyers who won or who lost; the court calendars were always overloaded with claims and actions over titles. Mines which were actively producing were rendered bankrupt; actual value meant nothing.

The Comstock had become a land where right and wrong were words without meaning, where the only test was what you had the power to accomplish, where might was right, where you escaped the grinding of the machine only if you were too small to attract attention or too shrewd to stumble into traps.

The bonanza on which Virginia City had been founded had pinched out in 1864. The workings had been shallow, and swiftly exhausted, though not before yielding approximately fifty millions of dollars in new wealth. The original discoverers of the bonanza, an unlettered, stupid lot mostly, had disposed of their holdings without the faintest realization of what they owned. . .

It had all started when two bewhiskered prospectors, Peter O Riley and Patrick McLaughlin, decided to deepen the mouth of their little spring to get more water for their rockers. In finding more water, they also found more gold. They boasted about their find, and there appeared on the scene a human wreck, admittedly not quite right in the head, named Henry Comstock. Comstock asserted that the spring belonged to him and his friend Manny Penrod; he insisted that he also owned the entire area thereabouts, and because he talked with fierce authority—and also because they didn't think too much of it anyway—the real discoverers took Comstock and Penrod into partnership. They panned as much as \$100 a day in gold, and paid no attention whatsoever to the unpleasant blue stuff which clogged their rockers and which was the outcropping of the richest vein of silver the world had ever known.

They were the discoverers and the first victims. They had established 'claims to property worth almost half a billion dollars, and Comstock had given the lode his name.

And McLaughlin sold his quarter interest for \$3,500, Manny Penrod held on a few days longer and received \$8,500 for his hundred million dollars' worth. Henry Comstock sold his share for \$11,000, and Pat O'Riley eventually got \$10,000 for his interest, and went about happily boasting how he had tricked the ignoramuses from California.

They had sought gold and had found it in modest quantities. They had never thought in terms of silver, but from the time deep mining started the greater wealth of the lode was silver. It was present in the deep workings in fantastic quantities, and the unbelievable extent of it caused all except a few insiders to ignore the presence of gold. Men thought in terms of silver because there was more of it to see, and the gold became important only to those who analyzed the reports from the mines and observed that 44 per cent of the wealth being taken from the lode was in gold.

It was too sudden, too brilliant, too easy. Virginia City and its neighbor, Gold Hill, became settlements in which excesses were normal, where conventional standards did not exist.

Human life was cheap. Mine owners, interested only in new bonanzas, paid scant attention to the safety factor. There were explosions and cave-ins, there were—at deep levels—geysers of steaming water which scalded the workers and killed them, there were innumerable deaths caused by faulty timbering, faulty hoisting machinery, inexperienced use of explosives. And still the miners came, there was never a dearth of labor.

The law of the individual held sway. There was a discernible courtesy in the saloons on C Street for the simple reason that open discourtesy usually meant a fight, and to fight usually meant death or dismemberment.

The Comstock developed its own way of life, its own gusty sense of humor. Practical jokes, some of them rather grim, became the order of the day. Bad men drifted into Virginia City, holdups were frequent. Prostitution and gambling were wide open, and law enforcement was a travesty.

In 1865 came the first depression. With the pinching out of the original workings, it was generally conceded that the boom days had ended. Merchants closed their shops and moved on to other fields; miners were struggling through country rock and porphyry.

And then came William Sharon with all the money of Ralston's Bank of California behind him. And with new money came new bonanzas, bigger than any which had come before: strikes in Crown Point and Yellow Jacket and Kentuck and Hale & Norcross and a host of lesser mines.

Once again the Comstock was in bonanza, and this was the beginning of the era where the big man got bigger and the small man was destroyed altogether.

This was the condition which existed in 1868 when Professor Brutus Carmichael's Great Amalgamated Shows arrived in Virginia City, when the great drama of the Lode's first years was about to be followed by drama infinitely greater.

XV

THE 15TH OF OCTOBER brought a portent of what might be expected during the winter in Virginia City.

Biting winds swept down from the mountains and up from the canyons, the mercury dropped unseasonably, nights became downright cold; and dealers in firewood raised their prices.

Professor Carmichael's troupe continued to enjoy a considerable measure of success. The Professor's arrangement with the manager of the Opera House was agreeably flexible when the theater was vacant, the Professor's company was permitted to show; when other attractions were booked, the Carmichael troupe moved out.

The box-office figures were not startling, nor even anything like they had been during the first two or three weeks of the engagement, but they continued more than adequate. Residents of the Comstock were starved for entertainment, and they did not object—in fact, they even relished—seeing the same thing over and over again. Admission prices were kept at one and two dollars, and the performers were encouraged to maintain a high standard. It was the sort of show to which families—including children—could go.

There were occasional discussions about disbanding, but nobody wished to leave. They talked vaguely of playing Carson City when their welcome had been worn thin, but meanwhile they stuck together and managed to eke out a living that was better than adequate.

Personally, the Professor was doing well and having the time of his life. He was a jolly, convivial soul who rapidly achieved popularity in the bars along C Street. What was more important, his Elixir of Eternity seemed to be filling an important niche in the history of internal medicine in the Comstock.

It was pleasant to take, thanks to a considerable percentage of alcohol, and its chief ingredient was cascara, which could not fail to improve the health of the average taker since most buyers were more or less in need of a laxative. It was bitter enough to be impressive and to act as a tonic, and there certainly was nothing harmful in it.

What was more, the Professor became an unofficial doctor. Because he was presumed to have invented the Elixir of Eternity, and because the Elixir benefited most of its users, it followed logically that the Professor was regarded as an expert in other bodily ailments—an impression which he was at no pains to discourage.

He was cheerful, bright, available . . . and he charged no fees. He loved to talk, and most Comstockers enjoyed hearing him. After the third drink (usually paid for by someone else) he held forth glibly and at length on any topic. No matter how little he knew, it was a safe bet that the majority of his listeners knew even less, and so he spoke with final authority. Even those who disagreed were loath to do so because the Professor was popular. Half drunk, he was a show in himself.

The Professor talked often, and, possibly, too much. He had learned the details of the onetime grubstake partnership between Malcolm Douglas and Logan Berkeley and, inasmuch as he and Mom had observed the growth of affection between his daughter, Althea, and Malcolm Douglas, he assumed a strident partisanship and talked about it on every possible occasion.

Regarding Malcolm as a potential son-in-law, and being filled

with the hope that whoever married his daughter would be wealthy, it was his professed ambition to see Malcolm emerge as a full partner of Logan Berkeley.

It was generally conceded that by due legal process Malcolm could accomplish nothing, but there was a feeling that he might achieve a certain success in other ways: his uncanny deftness with knives, for one thing. The thought appealed to the innate love of the dramatic in Virginia City. As gossip took head and grew and spread, and as the Professor rather unwittingly encouraged it, the idea that the two young men were enemies, and that there would some day be a personal showdown between them, took root.

Sympathy was mostly with Malcolm because he was the person who had nothing, and therefore was classified with most of the men who listened and talked. There was a natural antagonism to Logan Berkeley, not because of who he was, or his personality, but because his little mine was producing dramatically and it was generally thought that a man with that much money should be willing to share it.

So the legend of enmity grew, and other factors contributed.

The Professor had made it plain on more than one inebriate session that there was a romance flowering between his lovely daughter and Malcolm Douglas. It was therefore cause for conversation and conjecture when it became apparent that Logan Berkeley was also interested in Miss Althea Carmichael.

In the belief that he was interested in the young lady there was a unanimity of opinion. The evidence was too visible to be disputed.

Several times he had been observed driving her about the countryside in his handsome new rig with the gay varnish, the pair of spanking bays, the gleaming harness studded with silver from his own mine. Of course they were invariably accompanied by Mom, but that didn't alter the fact that the element of rivalry had entered into the picture. "Malcolm Douglas's girl," said some. "It ain't enough Berkeley should take his mine, he's also stealing Miss Carmichael."

The pro-Malcolm faction blithely ignored the fact that young Mr. Douglas didn't seem to be taking the situation too much to heart. He seemed to have a good deal of spare time on his hands, and he spent a fair proportion of it with Deborah Cortland, the artist lady. He walked with her into the mountains when she went sketching; he invited her to the mansion on A street for meals (although it was, of course, Mom who supervised the meals and who really was the hostess); and he seemed to be unmindful of the fact that Logan Berkeley was exerting all of his considerable masculine charm on Althea Carmichael.

Outwardly, that is. Actually, things were different.

There was a bitterness deep inside Malcolm Douglas, a bitterness which he had too much pride to show, a resentment which he concealed successfully from everybody except Deborah Cortland. And this much he had learned about Deborah in the first few weeks of their acquaintanceship: he was unable to conceal anything from her.

She viewed the situation with interested and understanding eyes. She fell short in only one way: In analyzing the others, she forgot to analyze herself. She did not squarely face the question of why she had become so interested in Malcolm Douglas as a person. And the chances are that even if she had asked herself the question, she would not—or could not—have answered it candidly.

She was not given to self-delusion, but even so staunch a character as Deborah was not proof against blindness. She had trained herself to look on life with interest, but objectively. She was the habitual spectator. She still fancied herself in that role, never suspecting that her interest was rapidly becoming more personal than clinical.

She knew that Malcolm was aware of what was going on, but since he never discussed Althea, Miss Cortland could not know what he was actually thinking. It would have been difficult to evaluate anyway, because Malcolm himself wasn't sure.

He was in love with Althea. He could have been jealous of any other man in whom she showed a serious interest. But the very fact that that man happened to be Logan Berkeley made his jealousy more certain and deeper.

Althea was mercenary. Or perhaps it wasn't fair to call her mercenary: you might say that she was practical, and she looked into the future with clear eyes and calm appraisement.

Logan Berkeley was young scarcely a year older than Malcolm. He was handsome. He was in a fair way to become wealthy. He was a minor power in Virginia City, not big enough to excite the open enmity of the really big men, but important enough to attract attention.

He went quietly and unobtrusively about the job of extracting from his mine the rich black sulphuret which was almost pure silver, and the quartz which was rich in gold. He mined it, had it milled, and shipped it down below. The impractical, suave young Southern planter had been metamorphosed into the practical, suave Comstock mine superintendent.

He represented in this new, crude land everything that Malcolm wished to be. He could afford a display which Malcolm could not afford. He sought Althea Carmichael openly, making no secret of his interest in her. If he was aware of the growing hostility which Malcolm entertained for him, he gave no sign. He was a frequent visitor

at the home of Brian Boru O'Mara where the troupe lived, he was generally liked by the other boarders; he was thoughtful and courteous and generous; he treated Malcolm with the pleasant warmth inspired by old friendship, but without effusiveness. It was his very unawareness of what Malcolm felt that gave to that young man an exasperating feeling of futility.

Malcolm tried to mask his resentment of Logan, tried to conceal his jealousy. A certain stubborn pride impelled him to leave Althea to herself as much as possible, which was the same as leaving her to Logan. Occasionally he caught her regarding him speculatively, as though wondering whether his ardor had cooled, and he refused to enlighten her. He did not try to make love to her, nor did he try to take advantage of the fact that she probably loved him as deeply as she was capable of loving anyone.

He knew that Logan dazzled her. Berkeley was dashing and gay and debonair. He was everything that the perfect young wealthy suitor should be. He was attentive to Mom, on a basis of easy friendship with the Professor, and friendly with the other boarders.

It seemed to Malcolm that with all the cards stacked in his favor, Logan was nevertheless playing them with unbeatable shrewdness.

And so Malcolm did the only thing he could do. He went his own way, thought his own thoughts, nurtured his own grievances, and bided his time.

It was only natural that in his new loneliness he should become more and more dependent on the companionship of Deborah Cortland.

XVI

NOBODY COULD BE quite certain whose party it was. Mom made the sandwiches and cookies, Heidi Kramer prepared an elaborate cake which approximated pastry, Marcella Drake volunteered to mix quantities of lemonade, and Althea compiled a list of games which could be played provided they decided to play games.

The two highlights of the evening—one a mere suggestion and the other a tangible contribution—came from persons outside the Carmichael troupe.

Deborah Cortland, New York born and bred, said she had never attended a taffy pull, and her suggestion that they have one was greeted as a minor inspiration.

Logan Berkeley appeared with a wagonload of fine logs for the fireplace—a not inconsiderable contribution, for wood was scarce and expensive in Virginia City—and vast quantities of chestnuts to be roasted.

Brian Boru O'Mara, with the enthusiastic cooperation of the Professor, supplied the whisky.

The troupe was resting for a week while a comic-opera company performed at the theater. The performers welcomed the change, the chance to catch up on personal things such as the repair of costumes and jokes, and their spirit was festive.

The mansion was snug despite the wind which howled down from the mountains with a vivid foretaste of what winter would be like on the Washoe. The windows rattled, and each opening of the front door brought shivers to the guests. It was an excellent night to remain at home, to fraternize, to remember themselves as people and not as performers.

O'Mara had invited a single guest—a long, tall, fragile-looking gentleman with mildly humorous eyes, a sparse black beard, and a gentle manner. He was dressed in long black coat, black trousers, little bow tie, and a white shirt, and he was introduced as Dan De Quille, reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*, foremost newspaper of the Comstock.

De Quille, whose real name was William Wright (though only his intimates knew that), gave an impression of supreme melancholy. His manner was grave, almost somber, his smile shy, his attitude apologetic. He would have blanked out completely had not most of those at the party been told in advance that Dan was famous throughout the West for his broad, biting humor, for his magnificently grotesque exaggeration, for his sound journalism, for his courage and integrity.

He gave the impression of being a lone and lonely man. He'd been born in Knox County, Ohio, in 1829, the oldest of nine children. He had homesteaded with his family in West Liberty, Iowa, in 1849. In 1853 he had married a girl named Caroline Coleman, and in due course the couple produced five children, of which two died in infancy.

The rigorous dullness of Iowa farm life made no irresistible appeal to Dan. He had the itch to be moving, to break out of the nothing which surrounded him. He reached an understanding with his wife and joined a party which was headed overland for California in 1857. He never regretted his decision to leave Iowa, and his wife seemed adequately to endure his absence, and so, in the years which

followed, he dutifully supported his family and lived his own life in his own way.

He struck out for himself in the Sierra foothills and went prospecting for gold, there and in the Mono Lake region. He was one of the first to hear of the Grass Valley assay which indicated that the Comstock lode was fabulously rich—the preliminary figures indicating \$3,000 to the ton in silver and \$1,000 in gold—and he promptly started east again. Being a good practical miner, but a trifle late in arriving on the Comstock, he had failed to locate a good claim, and had eventually taken a job as a reporter under Joe Goodman, who had started his *Enterprise* in 1858 at a Mormon settlement called Genoa, moved it to Carson City when that prosperous little town was the chief distributing center for the huge volume of freight and supplies being hauled over the Sierras, and eventually transferred the plant to Virginia City.

There Dan joined the staff. Newspaper work was new to him, but so, for that matter, was it to most of those connected with the paper. Since then he had built up a reputation as a funny man, an accurate reporter, a common-sense practical miner, and a fearless individual. Universally liked and respected throughout the Comstock, he gave no favors and asked none; he wrote the news as he saw it, and stood ready at all times to assume personal responsibility for whatever he had said in print.

He'd been glad to accept O'Mara's invitation to the party. There were few who fathomed the depth of De Quille's loneliness, his basic hunger for homeyness and warmth, for something which differed from the mad, hectic scramble after wealth. He shyly accepted introductions, said correct, pleasant things to members of the troupe, and plunked himself down alongside Deborah Cortland.

"I like your work," he said abruptly.

"I like yours," she responded, warned by the man's simple directness. "I've read a lot of your lighter stuff since I've been here. When I first got to Virginia City, it didn't seem funny. Now that I've brought myself around to a Comstock way of thinking, I find it hilarious."

He blushed, and thanked her with his eyes. "Humor," he said, "is nothing but exaggeration of facts with which your readers are familiar. I imagine that most of what I write would be quite boring to people in other parts of the country."

"I don't know." Deborah liked the man's intransigent honesty. "I think your description of the Chinaman flying a kite during a Washoe zephyr—the kite being an iron door with a chain for a tail—"I regard that as classic."

"So do I," De Quille agreed with surprising enthusiasm. "But I didn't write it. It was done by a young man who used to work on the paper. Fellow named Sam Clemens."

Logan Berkeley bore down on them, and the two men greeted each other as old friends. Over clasped hands, De Quille grinned down at Deborah. "Think of this, Miss Cortland, I'm shaking hands with a wealthy millionaire." A little frown touched her forehead, and he went on to explain in his quiet voice: "Here in the Comstock we have wealthy millionaires and poor ones, too. The former—like Logan here—own mines which are producing; the latter merely have hope of bonanza." He returned his attention to Logan. "I understand you've hit a rich new ore pocket."

"Yes, I've been lucky. It's difficult mining, though. Fast as I take out the ore I have to put in square sets to prevent cave-ins."

"They all do. Without the necessity for timbering, there'd simply be too much profit in mining." De Quille seated himself, motioned Logan to do the same, and courteously included Deborah in the conversation. "What do you think of this very shocking young lady, Logan?"

Berkeley grinned at her. "I don't know what she ran away from," he said lightly, "but I'm sure it must have been justified. She has won my admiration. Our most estimable ladies are unanimous in denouncing her."

"Because I visit saloons and brothels?" Deborah threw back her head and laughed, her black eyes dancing. "They'll never believe that I don't drink and also that I happen to be pure as the driven snow."

"It's something they wouldn't want to believe," remarked De Quille. "You violate their rules. They draw a sharp line. A decent woman must act in such and such a way. You act differently. Therefore, by process of the simplest logic, you are not decent."

"They'd be satisfied if I actually entered on a career of sin, wouldn't they?"

"Naturally. It would justify their dire prophecies. They would understand you. I think that's what they most resent, that you're not understandable."

"Is anybody—in Virginia City?"

"My dear Miss Cortland: I thought better of you than that. Everybody in Virginia City is understandable. Their search for wealth is a universal habit, their drinking, their carousing, their indifference to personal danger, their practical joking, their selfishness. They're all conformists. They resent you, or love you, because you are not."

Brian Boru O'Mara arrived with a tray of potent beverages. The two men accepted brimming glasses of whisky; and Deborah shook

her head. She said, "I've got to maintain a pretense of respectability."

Mr. O'Mara required little inducement to assume responsibility for the drink which had been destined for her. He held it up before her, bowed low, and tossed it off. "Excellent," he remarked. "Every time I drink whisky I thank the saints that the water in Virginia City is considered impure, dangerous, and otherwise undesirable."

Others were gravitating toward the little group. Mom and the Professor and Althea, Manny Hirsch, Rudolph Kleinman, Heide, Marcella Drake, and—last of all—Malcolm Douglas.

Logan Berkeley led the way to the roaring fire and gave instructions as to how the chestnuts were to be prepared and roasted. Mom and Althea and Heide Kramer disappeared into the kitchen, to return a few minutes later with the collation.

It was all very gay and homelike and intimate. They ate and talked and laughed and told stories, and all restraint dropped from them. They were indifferent to the wind that howled outside, to the countryside which lay bleak and forbidding beyond the glow of the fire.

They were merry. They played games: charades and twenty questions, and finally, blindman's buff.

That was fun, with Mom stationed by the fireplace to keep the blindman from falling in. And eventually Malcolm Douglas was blindman, and he caught Marcella Drake and kissed her lightly on the cheek, which he was supposed to do; and then the blindfold was put on her, and she stumbled about the room, searching, groping, in the midst of hilarity.

She stumbled over a chair and might have fallen had not Manny Hirsch been standing nearby. He caught her, and her hands fastened on his arm.

"Kiss him!" yelled someone.

Marcella kissed him. The laughter rose high and free. Then a figure lashed through the crowd and jerked the blindfold from Marcella's eyes. Gregory Drake was shaking with fury, and he took her by the shoulders and shook her violently.

"Now you're doing it in public," he raged. "Well, no wife of mine is going to advertise herself as a prostitute. Get the hell upstairs." He shoved her toward the door.

Malcolm Douglas wrapped strong fingers about the slender wrist of Manny Hirsch. "Steady," he whispered. "Steady."

And Manny stood motionless, white with futile fury. He said wittily, over and over again, "Oh! the son of a bitch; the dirty son of a bitch."

XVII

IT WAS DURING the year 1868 that a lesson of vital importance was learned on the Comstock and in San Francisco. For the first time people were made aware that there was more to the mining of gold and silver than the mere sinking of a shaft and the subsequent extraction of precious metals.

They learned that a mine had two values: its worth as a producer and its worth as a speculative football. Each was independent of the other, yet the two phases were inextricably tangled.

To people who wagered their hopes and their savings in San Francisco, the mines of the Comstock were nothing more nor less than names on a big board. The public was not concerned with the intrinsic value of the mines, nor with their actual prospects; all it desired to know was whether the shares would go up or down.

They read reports, of course, and talked learnedly in mining terms, but they didn't understand what they read. By the same token there were practical miners in Virginia City and Gold Hill who knew almost as little about stock manipulation. There were two sources of wealth: one came from the galleries and stopes of the mines, the other was paper. Either could yield a fortune; either could bring swift ruin.

The possibilities were brought home in spectacular fashion by William Sharon, Virginia City representative of the Bank of California. Sharon was a gambler, though most of his gambling was done with the money of other people. Slender, dapper, shrewd, and utterly without emotion, he had become a power on the Comstock. More swiftly than he acquired power, he developed the desire for greater power. And so he set about selecting a medium for his overwhelming ambition.

Calmly, coldly, and with unassailable logic, Sharon hit upon the Hale & Norcross mine as his field of operations, and thus precipitated a battle which was not to end for years and which was to affect men and women in all walks of life and in all parts of the nation. It was to affect mining and finance, and it was to write a new and different chapter in the fantastic history of the Lode.

Living in solitary grandeur in Virginia City, William Sharon had his own private system of espionage. He knew, or believed he knew,

everything that there was to know about every mine in the area. He knew, for instance, that Hale & Norcross, which was owned by C. L. Low and a group of his friends, had proved most disappointing; but he also knew—or believed—that its long-range prospects were excellent.

The mine lay near the southern boundary of Virginia City itself, near the Divide. It was situated between two solidly prosperous mines, the Savage and the Chollar-Potosi, but at the Hale & Norcross the lode was split by a wide porphyry horse or wall of barren rock, and, during the early years, the large bodies of ore on the footwall side were not worth milling.

In 1865 a rich ore body had been discovered at the 600-foot level in a crosscut which was run to the east of the porphyry horse, and in the two years that followed the mine produced in excess of two million dollars in bullion, and paid dividends of \$790,000.

Early in 1868 Sharon was convinced that the greatest* of all bonanzas still lay untouched beneath the lode footage which was the Hale & Norcross. Having made the decision to acquire the mine, he inaugurated the first of the great battles which were to rock the San Francisco Stock Exchange for years to come, and to set a pattern for others.

Once Sharon's intentions were apparent, there was a wild rush to the market, and speculative fever hit a new high. Backed by the almost limitless wealth of Ralston and the Bank crowd, Sharon forced the shares of Hale & Norcross to fantastic heights. On January 8, 1868, the 800 shares of the company were listed on the exchange at \$300 each; thirty-six days later the price was \$7,100 per share.

There were innumerable speculators who underestimated the grimness of the struggle and the tenacity of William Sharon. Knowing that the stock had long since passed beyond any possible actual value, brokers sold short . . . sold shares which they did not own, planning to buy them in when the price structure crashed.

But Sharon held on, and the shorts were cruelly squeezed. On February 12th two shares sold for \$10,000 each, and during one mad week \$100,000 was publicly offered each day for ten shares.

William Sharon won. At a meeting of the stockholders on March 10, 1868, Sharon took control, only to learn swiftly that he had been overly optimistic. In order to raise money to exploit new workings in the mine, he levied assessments of more than \$200,000, and before the end of the year—a new bonanza having failed to develop—the stock fell below \$50 per share. It was not even in demand at that price.

But Sharon had given a brilliant example of how the game could

be played. It never occurred to him that he had taught others, and his own fatuous ego was to prove the keystone of his discomfiture.

To Sharon everything could be reduced to mathematics, he ignored the human element—and therein he erred. He knew nothing, and cared even less, about a man named Fair—James G. Fair—who had been discharged as assistant superintendent of Hale & Norcross in 1867, who felt that he had been unjustly treated, who journeyed to new fields in Idaho, and who returned to the Comstock in the latter part of 1868.

Jim Fair held Hale & Norcross in high esteem, and his optimism was based on practical experience. He himself was an expert quartz miner; he had been both foreman and assistant superintendent of Hale & Norcross; and his belief in its future was considerably sounder than wishful thinking.

Fair sought John W. Mackay, who had acquired a controlling interest in the Kentuck, which promptly had gone into bonanza.

The two men were different in type and temperament, but they were united by the threat of Sharon monopoly and by the fact that they, being practical miners, had access to information which Sharon could get only at secondhand, or not at all.

Fair had great personal magnetism. He talked smoothly and easily, and he radiated a warmth and friendliness which was actually no part of his character. John Mackay, on the other hand, was a quiet, thoughtful man who, because he had a slight stammer which embarrassed him, spoke seldom and thought deeply.

They had known each other for years, though not intimately. They dined at the International and, over their cigars, discussed Hale & Norcross.

"It's a sure thing," Fair insisted with the driving enthusiasm of a salesman. "I worked there, and I know. The stuff they took out in '66 and '67 isn't even a sample of what's really there."

Mackay drummed on the table with hard, calloused fingers. He made no secret of the fact that he was interested.

"Y-y-you're p-p-pretty sure of that, Jim?"

"Positive. If they hadn't kicked me out, they'd have hit bonanza long ago. It's still there, all of it. If we could get control of that mine . . ."

Mackay smiled gently. "G-getting control of anything from Sharon w-w-wouldn't be easy."

"It would, though. The stock is almost worthless. People have heard so many false stories about Hale & Norcross that they'll never believe any other tales, even if they're true."

"And Sharon? What would he do if he found us trying to b-b-buy up a controlling interest?"

"He'd hold on." Fair laughed, and his good nature—assumed for the occasion—was contagious. "But he'll never know, John. Never."

"Hm-mm!" Mackay wasn't a man to move too swiftly. "He might find out that you, former assistant superintendent, are buying; that I, with the Kentuck still in bonanza, am interested. S-s-seems we c-c-couldn't keep it s-s-secret."

"Right, John. But we'll never be known in it. We'll work through some insignificant firm of brokers in San Francisco. We'll take them into partnership. That way, we'll ensure their loyalty."

"You have someone in mind?"

"There's a firm in San Francisco. You never heard of them, nobody ever did. Flood & O'Brien. They own a saloon. I don't know much about O'Brien except he'll do what Flood tells him to do—and keep his mouth shut. Flood has been speculating in stock so tips he's gotten over the bar in his saloon. Some time ago they opened a little office, and call themselves brokers. They're laughed at by all the important men. Nothing they do will ever attract attention."

"M m-m-money?" asked John Mackay

"I figure you'll take the largest interest, John. You're the only one of us who has really got it. Flood and O'Brien have told me they can borrow an extra \$50,000 if they need it. I figure we'll operate on a verbal agreement." His eyes gleamed shrewdly. "We won't need a written contract if we're successful. We'll be compelled to stand together."

"I see what you mean," Mackay said slowly, "about n-n-not even trusting yourself."

"You can take, say, three eighths of our partnership. James Flood and William O'Brien will take three eighths between them. I'll take the remaining two eighths."

"And then . . ." Mackay's glance was steady, thoughtful, interested.

"Soon as we get controlling interest in Hale & Norcross, we'll elect ourselves directors and make me superintendent. I'll show you where the bonanza is." Fair was exulting over a triumph which was as yet only in the formative stage. "Somebody's got to break Sharon's power on the Comstock, John. Who can do it better than you and me? It's our chance to get rich, to become great men."

Mackay deliberated for a moment, then held out his hand. "It's a deal," he said simply. "B b-but remember this, Jim: just becoming rich won't make us great men. There's more to it than that."

Jim Fair's big laugh boomed across the dining room. Waiters heard it and other guests heard, but they didn't hear the words that followed. "Not for me there isn't, John Mackay. And not in the world the way it is today. All I ask is wealth: the greatness will come along with it."

And so, in the corner of a hotel dining room in Virginia City, two miners shook hands and the firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien was born.

XVIII

THE PORTRAIT OF Althea was finished. Deborah had worked in oils, taking infinite pains, without asking herself why.

Her technique was far from flawless in the medium. It lacked the facility of her work with pencil, charcoal, or crayon—or even with dry brush. Yet somehow, knowing her own shortcomings, it had seemed that her subject demanded the deeper perception, the more subtle shadings, that only oil could provide.

It stood on an easel in the parlor of the boardinghouse in which Deborah lived. There were three windows to the room and Deborah had drawn the curtains of the one which faced southeast, so that the light thrown on the easel was from the east and north.

The Professor was there and so was Mom. They had come with Althea in a fine, shiny new turnout Logan Berkeley had provided. Of course Logan had come along too, making quite an occasion of it. Malcolm got there before they did, by special invitation of the artist.

And now they stood looking at it, saying complimentary things. The Professor said it was magnificent, which was the Professor's way of talking and meant merely that the likeness was good. Logan Berkeley was enthusiastic.

Mom looked at the picture, then at her daughter, then at Deborah. There was a speculative light in Mom's placid blue eyes, and a new, respectful appraisal of the attractive young lady who had painted the portrait. Mom moved close to Deborah and whispered, "I'm afraid it's perfect."

Deborah flushed with pleasure, and felt a new closeness with Mom. She said a conventional "Thank you," but her eyes met those of the older woman and each knew what the other was thinking.

Nor was Althea deluded. Of course, she, too, said the fatuously pleasant things which were expected of her, but she did not say the

thing she was thinking. She studied the portrait, her eyes alternately sober and amused. Finally she smiled at Deborah and said, "I didn't realize you knew me that well."

The reaction of the two women surprised Deborah Cortland. She had not suspected either of so much discernment. She had expected that they would see the superficial, and like it. It was, at first glance, a kindly picture, a facile presentation of a pretty young girl. It was only when you looked closer and with more observant eyes that you saw the quality which justified all the work she'd put on it.

Malcolm Douglas said nothing. He stood back from the easel, studying the portrait, not even indulging in casual congratulations. He was frowning slightly, as though there were something on the canvas which he recognized but which disturbed him. He was looking upon a picture wherein the body was clothed but the soul naked.

He knew then that he was not the only person in the room who understood Althea. It looked like Althea . . . and then, as he looked a second and a third and a fourth time, he realized that it looked even more like her than that.

Logan Berkeley was genuinely enthusiastic. He offered to buy the portrait, Deborah smiled and shook her head.

"It isn't for sale," she said. "I'm giving it to Althea."

Berkeley and Althea protested. Mom smiled her quiet, knowing smile. There was considerable argument, but Deborah couldn't be swayed. She had done it for fun, she said, and because the Carmichaels had been so friendly. It was a small, unimportant gesture, and she hoped Althea would accept it as freely as she offered it.

Althea moved into a corner, near the portieres which separated the parlor from the dining room. She motioned Malcolm to her with her eyes. She said, "What do you think of it?"

He hesitated. Then he said simply, "I think it's remarkably good."

"Malcolm Douglas! You can act so stupid. You know what I mean."

"Yes. I think I always know what you mean." He looked across the room toward the group clustered about the painting. "Logan thinks it's wonderful."

"So do I," said Althea.

"He doesn't see it the way you do, though."

"Meaning that he doesn't see me as I am, is that it?"

"Probably. I think all Logan sees is that you are very lovely and desirable, and that there are few such women in Virginia City."

"You're being unpleasant."

"My profuse apologies." There was a mocking light in his eyes. "I'm probably imputing a greater depth to the portrait than it deserves."

"No-o . . ." She astonished him with her inflexible frankness. "That's me, all right. It's the way I am, the way I think. I'm not a very admirable person, am I, Malcolm?"

"I'm not a reasonable judge. It isn't easy to be in love with a girl and to watch her campaigning to marry another man."

Her eyes grew smoky with anger. "You make that sound horrid. He said, 'If I became a rich man tomorrow, would you marry me?'"

"Of course I would."

"And as long as I'm not wealthy, you're not considering me. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"You'd sell yourself to Logan if he asked you?"

She made an impatient gesture. "You have a way of making words sound different from the way they're supposed to sound. Well, I'll answer you in the same vein. Your words sounded cheap. I'll let mine sound the same way. Yes, I'd marry Logan if he asked me. And don't look shocked and inquire how a nice girl could do that if she wasn't in love with the man. If you'd ever been a nice girl, if you'd ever wanted nice things that other people had and that you couldn't get . . . you'd understand."

"A girl who sells herself—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake! *That* again. I'm too practical to agree with you. Logan is a gentleman. I'm fond of him. I might be in love with you, but even if I was foolish enough to marry you I wouldn't be in love with you for long. I wouldn't stay in love with any man who could give me only the same things I've always had—and hated."

She looked steadily into his eyes. Then she turned abruptly and walked across the room to the others. Before she reached them, the somberness had gone out of her expression. Her voice had a gay lilt, a youthful freshness and eagerness which belied the seriousness of her talk with Malcolm. He felt thwarted, baffled, defeated. He forced himself to smile, to do what was socially correct, to join the group and to pretend that he hadn't just received a shock. He didn't even notice Mom's quiet, appraising scrutiny, and wouldn't have understood it if he had noticed.

He refused Logan's invitation to drive back to the mansion with them. They left, taking the picture, and he remained with Deborah Cortland.

The Carriacouals and Logan rattled off down the street, the horses prancing and gleaming in the sun, the sound of Althea's laughter floating back to them on the cold, clear air.

Malcolm dropped into a chair and stared out of the window. He experienced a sense of frustration, of helplessness. Deborah seated herself opposite and looked at him.

"Is it really that bad?" she asked.

XIX

NOT ON FIRST meeting or second or third would you call Deborah Cortland beautiful. It wasn't enough to note that her features were delicate and almost perfect, that her complexion was one which women envied, that she wore the simplest clothes with an air of elegance, that her figure was full and womanly—those were the obvious, the superficial things.

You had to look deeper than that; you had to know her and understand her before you could fully savor her loveliness. You had to understand her zest for living, her eagerness, her bewilderment; you had to understand what it was that shone through her eyes, and not merely the fact that something was there. You had to understand why she had won the affection and respect of rough, uncouth men in Virginia City; you had to understand the quality which enabled her—with perfect safety and propriety—to do things no other respectable woman would dare to do.

The only thing that saved her from utter ostracism, that enabled her to continue to live in the home of a respectable couple, was the fact that she was an artist. Of course, the good ladies of Virginia City had no definite comprehension of what an artist was or of how she functioned. But they did know that Deborah Cortland's work had appeared frequently in *Harper's* and *Leslie's*, that it had an astonishing pictorial value and a pervasive sense of drama, that she was obviously paid for her work, that it was still regarded as good enough by the art editors of those effete Eastern magazines to be in demand, and that her drawings of Virginia City were becoming famous.

It seemed, though, claimed the virtuous ladies, that a decent woman would exercise her talents on things which were gentle and refined, and not confine her efforts to such things as mine disasters, grotesque groups in C. Street saloons, deft sketches of men betting more than they could afford on the turn of a card at the faro table, a gaudy, overdressed prostitute cradling in her arms the body of the man she loved, newly killed in a knife battle. The ladies were vastly impressed by the skill with which Deborah did these things, but the

very fact that she sought what was barred to them constituted an affront. It was a defiance of the social laws by which they themselves were sheltered.

They did not know that Deborah Cortland had given equal affront to her flighty, fluttery widowed mother in New York by doing the same sort of work in that city, that she had sketched the drama and pathos of the slums, of the underprivileged, of the forlorn and forgotten. They did not know that she had elicited from the very proper young banker to whom she had been briefly and passionlessly engaged an ultimatum to the effect that she'd either have to stop doing the sort of work she was doing, or else consider their engagement at an end. They did not know that her uncle, Cyrus Cortland, who was famous and successful and proper, was secretly delighted with her, and that he had encouraged her independence . . . wishing that he had had the courage to do the same thing at the beginning of his career. They did not know that Deborah had fled from the stagnating propriety of New York and had journeyed to California around the Horn, doing some excellent sketches on shipboard, and that she had stilled in the San Francisco home of her mother's sister and that sister's husband, Mr. and Mrs. Archer Voorhees, and that, to escape their bitterly articulate disapproval she had journeyed to the Comstock, where, at last, she found life as raw and as rugged and as free as she always hoped to find it.

Those things they did not know about Deborah, those things they would not have understood. She was a traitor to her sex, an independent who threatened the social structure of feminine dependence, a woman who could not be understood—and who therefore should not be tolerated.

••• And Deborah, knowing that she was outcast by those whose opinions she did not value, and that she was welcomed by those she considered worth while, was happy.

She had found herself on the Comstock, and there she proposed to remain.

XX

THE SUN MOVED westward, creating its premature dusk in Virginia City. The parlor of Deborah Cortland's boardinghouse was caught in the same gray mantle, and the shabby room took on an intimacy to which it could not pretend in brighter light.

Deborah was seated in a rocking chair, facing the couch on which Malcolm tried to relax. Save for the murmur of the city, no sound came to them: no traffic on the street outside, no barking of dogs, no shrill voices of children playing, no pulse of activity within the house.

Malcolm still wore the little frown which she had observed earlier. She knew he was deeply troubled, and she wished that she could break through the barrier of his reticence.

Their friendship had ripened swiftly. Toward this oddly different girl, Malcolm felt an emotion which was not at all akin to his feeling for Althea. She conveyed to him a sense of peace and well-being, a warmth and an understanding which was novel and pleasant.

He was not consciously aware of her striking beauty, not because she was not beautiful, but rather because there was something repressed in her very good looks, a quality which was in sharp contrast to Althea's more obvious charms. He felt, with Deborah, that he was with a friend, with Althea his emotions were the violent ones of a man who would be a lover.

The silence which enveloped them was rich with sympathy, with understanding. She waited patiently for him to break the spell, and when he did, it was in a flat, matter of fact voice.

"You paint well," he said.

"Thank you." The words were almost foolishly conventional, but both knew that they carried a meaning deeper than their simplicity.

He said, "Is that the sort of girl she is?"

"Don't you know?"

He twisted miserably, found a more comfortable posture, and lifted troubled eyes to her.

"I suppose I've known for a long time. I didn't know it was that obvious, though."

"It isn't." She hesitated, then said, "Iogan Berkeley didn't see it."

"What didn't he see?"

A smile crossed her lips, lighting her whole face. Then she was serious again. "We're fencing, Malcolm. Why don't we talk frankly?"

He nodded gratefully, miserably. "I suppose the trouble is," he said, "that I don't understand myself."

She nodded, saying nothing.

"I'm all mixed up." His words gathered speed and force as he let himself go in the magic of their new intimacy. "Things used to be so simple. I wanted something. I tried to get it. I succeeded or failed, it didn't much matter. I fought in a war. I did what I was told to do the best way I could. That didn't matter much, either. I came here seeking a showdown with Iogan. I had it. He didn't see things

my way, and that didn't matter too much, either . . . so, by all the rules, it should have ended there. But it hasn't ended. It doesn't look as though it could end."

"Althea?" she asked.

"Partly that, though her part in it is new. And it isn't just the mine. Logan sees things his way; I see them differently. I'm not silly enough to make empty gestures that would yield nothing. So I accept his verdict. Pretty soon the troupe will disband. That's logically my cue to return to San Francisco. But I'll stay right here in Virginia City. I don't know why."

"Are you in love with Althea?"

"Yes."

He sat staring at the worn carpet, then looked up at her. "I believe so," he amended. "I've never really known any other girls. It's difficult to judge."

"And she?"

"She'll marry Logan Berkeley if he asks her."

"Do you know why?"

"Of course I know." He glanced at her in surprise that she should ask so obvious a question. "Because he's a rich man, because he can give her the things she's always wanted and never had, because—because—"

"Go ahead. Be honest with yourself, Malcolm."

"Because he's a gentleman. I doubt if she's known many."

"A man of honor?" There was the faintest edge of sarcasm in her words.

"Precisely. I don't believe he could ever do anything he thought was wrong. I doubt whether he would ever fail to do anything he thought was right."

"You don't believe, then, that he's cheating you out of something which is rightfully yours?"

"That's not the way to put it. Deborah. I feel that he is withholding something which is rightfully mine. I can't use the word 'cheating' because that implies a dishonorable intention."

She smiled once again and once again her face was radiant. "You're a surprisingly analytic person, Mr. Douglas. Now let's see whether you have the courage to carry that self-analysis to its conclusion." She drew a deep breath. "You are either in love with Althea Carmichael or you imagine you are, which amounts to the same thing. To lose her would make you more or less miserable and also hurt your pride. But that's not really what's troubling you. The thing that cuts deepest is the fact that if you do lose Althea, you'll lose her to Logan Berkeley. Right?"

He nodded. "I never put it that clearly," he confessed, "but I suppose that's the way it is."

"Same thing with his Rattlesnake mine. It isn't just because it's a bonanza mine, but because it belongs to him. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"You're not wrong, Deborah." He gave a little laugh in which there was no mirth. "You have the uncommon faculty of never being wrong."

"Would it help you to talk things out, Malcolm? Not the surface of things, but what's really underneath?"

He started to say Yes, then changed his mind. He said, "It isn't something you can talk about. If I myself can't understand it, how could I make you see it?"

"You could try."

She saw his eyes close, as though in pain. He wanted to explain to her that he'd like to try, but that he knew it wouldn't be any use. What went on inside him was too complicated. The fabric of his existence had been woven into a pattern which had not yet taken shape; he knew neither the warp nor the wool, nor, indeed, how or why it had come to be woven that way.

His thoughts drifted away, far, far back into the past, to a land—to conditions—which Deborah did not know and could not understand.

.XXI

THE FIRST HOT BREATH of summer scorched the low country of South Carolina, parching the roads and fields, drying up the corn and developing fine, sturdy cotton.

Big Cypress plantation was tranquil and lovely. It was a world in itself, dependent solely upon itself. Its hub was the huge, simple plantation house with its Doric columns, its broad veranda, its rich and limitless acres.

The lawn in front of the house was bright with flowers, with roses that clambered and roses that bloomed from bushes, with late azalea and japonica, magnolia and sweetshrub. It was shaded by venerable live oaks from the massive branches of which huge bunches of gray Spanish moss were festooned. In the hollow where a tiny creek moved sluggishly toward the swamp, there was the grove of cypress trees from which the plantation took its name. There, too, could be found

black gum and walnut and palmetto. On the higher reaches were pines, straight and proud, and all about the pines were the tilled fields which by late summer would be snowy with cotton.

Malcolm Douglas waited near the slave quarters for his father. The year was 1850, and Malcolm was seven. He listened with only half an ear to a story being told him by Maum Ella, who was Sam's wife, and he did so only by way of being polite and to kill time until his father returned from the fields.

Malcolm's father was named James Alan Douglas. He was a stocky, reticent man who talked with a burr he'd acquired during his boyhood in Scotland. Malcolm adored him and was also slightly afraid of him, for his father was stern and just and very, very wise. He knew everything—or so Malcolm thought—and there was never need for punishment because the boy would not have considered disobeying even the slightest wish of his father.

Malcolm and his parents lived in a neat white cottage a quarter-mile from the plantation house. It was a wonderful place, shiny as a new pin, tranquil as a breath of spring. With the first coming of warm weather it burst forth into a bower of wistaria, and around the small veranda jonquils and jasmine bloomed in profusion. The cottage was the home of the overseer of Big Cypress plantation, and James Alan Douglas was the overseer.

At seven years of age, Malcolm had no appreciation of the status of an overseer. He knew only that his cottage was as much a part of Big Cypress as was the big house, that he belonged on those vast acres as surely as did the Berkeley boys, Edward, Logan, and Austin. Edward was three years older than Malcolm, with the magnificent wisdom and maturity of ten; Logan was eight, and Austin was six. That the three other boys were named Berkeley, that they lived in the big white house, and that Malcolm's last name was Douglas meant nothing to him. The four were inseparable; they were isolated; and they shared their childish games and hopes and fears.

Malcolm was almost as much at home in the big house as he was in the cottage which his parents occupied. And he was as welcome there. He shared what they had, and they were welcome to their share of his meager possessions.

Never had there been any difference between them. Each of the four had his own pony, each his own pride. There were no other families for miles around, and they were dependent on one another for companionship.

A tutor who lived in the big house taught all four of them. In studies, as in outdoor activities, Edward was the leader by reason of his seniority. Between Logan and Malcolm there was rivalry, physi-

cal and mental, although Logan didn't care too much about the latter. Austin was Malcolm's particular charge, since he was younger—but still closer to Malcolm in years than to his brothers.

So it was to Malcolm that Austin flung, rather than to his own brothers. Malcolm was more patient, understood him better, was more tolerant of the babyishness which had not yet vanished. The Negroes on the plantation spoke of them always as a quartet—a unit, if you wish: "Them fo' boys, they's always up to somethin'."

It couldn't have been that way on any other plantation, or with any overseer other than James Alan Douglas.

James Douglas wasn't a born overseer; he wasn't white trash; he wasn't even a native. He had dignity, pride, education, and a foreign background. He had become an overseer through force of circumstance.

He'd been born in Scotland, near Glasgow, in 1802, and had been raised on a rocky, reluctant farm. He and his brothers had worked hard to extract a meager living from the land, and at night they had studied. Farming and reading: that was their life, and while the farm restricted them, books opened the door to the world and implanted a great desire to seek a more fruitful life.

In 1822, when James Douglas was twenty, and after his father had died, he and his brother Bruce sold their shares of the farm and emigrated to America. They were, by then, quiet, somber, efficient, well educated young men to whom the lure of the new world was irresistible.

Unfortunately—or fortunately—the ship broker who undertook to secure passage for them blundered. They sailed from Glasgow on the same day, but they sailed on different ships, Bruce going to New York and James to Charleston, South Carolina.

Before landing in Carolina, James had planned to join his brother in New York, but when he felt the warmth of the land, and observed the richness of the soil, he knew that he belonged there. Because his farmer's soul could not resist the challenge, he remained in South Carolina.

He moved upcountry and leased a bit of acreage not far from Big Cypress plantation. Because he could not afford to own slaves, and abhorred the idea of slavery, he worked with his own hands and with such casual help as he might employ. With high courage he undertook to beat an agricultural system which could not be beaten. As a small, independent farmer he never had a chance.

He earned the respect of the plantation owners, and the friendship of Colonel Sumter Berkeley, proprietor of Big Cypress. He was recognized as unimpeachably honest, courageous, and an excellent farmer.

A farmer, not a planter. His meager acres did not entitle him to the latter classification.

He attended divine services on Sunday in the private chapel at Big Cypress; he was single, lonely, unintrusive, and respected. He was made welcome at church by Mrs. Berkeley, wife of the Colonel, a fragile little woman who had been born a Ravenel and whose parents owned a plantation only slightly less vast and prosperous than Big Cypress. She'd been raised on her family's James Island estate, and knew no life other than that of plantations.

So James Douglas labored diligently until the bad summer of 1832 when crops failed, injuring all planters, and ruining him. He went to Colonel Berkeley and applied for the job of overseer.

Colonel Berkeley was embarrassed. In his life, overseers were a necessity, but he had never known any like this quiet, unsmiling American citizen who had been born in Scotland. He said "You put me in an awkward position, Mr. Douglas. I admire you as a person and as a man who knows farming. You've lived here in the low country long enough to understand soil conditions. I trust you implicitly. But . . ." The Colonel hesitated, and James Douglas relieved him of the embarrassing burden.

"What you're trying to say, Colonel, is that an overseer doesn't have much standing as a man. Is that it?"

Berkeley was unaccustomed to such directness. He flushed and would have evaded a direct answer, but Douglas would have none of it.

"A man's standing as a man has nothing to do with his work," he stated. "I well know the status of overseers. I still apply for the position, and will not take it amiss if you refuse."

Colonel Berkeley said Yes, but he was not without misgivings. This was a feudal land, and these were feudal times. As a small, if unsuccessful, farmer, James Douglas commanded a certain social respect; as an overseer he would be relegated to a social limbo from which he could not escape.

He saw the man's future more clearly than Douglas could possibly see it. All the great plantations had overseers. They held a social status which was unique, and their own. But James Douglas would never find them congenial. They were a tough, uncouth, practical, hard-bitten crew, astute in the ways of farming and of handling slave labor, but they were—while perhaps estimable—different from James Douglas.

In 1832 James Douglas became overseer of Big Cypress and moved into the overseer's cottage. He was stern and just and efficient. The field hands, never having worked under anyone like him, were nerv-

ous; but they learned that he was, while a hard taskmaster, reasonable, and the plantation functioned more smoothly than ever before. But almost from the first, his new social status became apparent. It showed in little ways. Always, Colonel Berkeley had addressed him as Mr. Douglas. Within a week he was calling him Douglas, never realizing that he was doing so.

The Colonel and his lady tried to make it plain that they did not regard James Douglas as they would have looked upon any other overseer. They took particular pains to be friendly, and if it so happened that the man was never invited to a meal or to a social evening at the big house, that was simply because it was a thing that never entered their heads.

They knew he was studious, and they bade him help himself from the large and unused library in the big house. As the years passed, Big Cypress became more prosperous than ever before, grew the best long-staple cotton, and functioned without effort.

And James Alan Douglas, accepting his status without protest, refusing to presume upon the cordiality of the Berkeleys became a lonely person, a man who had no companions save his books.

In 1846—partly because he was in love and partly because he was lonely he married. His bride was a gentle, energetic, pudgy girl named Bessie Mallin, who was the daughter of a shoutin' Methodist preacher in Charleston. Bessie was deeply in love with her husband, a trifle in awe of him, and eager to please.

She moved into the overseer's house and cheerfully accepted her position as an overseer's wife. Actually, it was a step up in the world for her: not to be the wife of an overseer, but to be the wife of an educated man.

She was a fine, warm, not overly intellectual companion. After three years after their marriage, she proudly bore him a son.

They named him Malcolm.

XXII

NOT UNTIL MALCOLM DOUGLAS WAS THIRTEEN YEARS OF AGE did he sense any difference between himself and the Berkeley boys.

They rode together, hunted together, swam together, and fished together. The only real difference was on the level of education. On that subject James Douglas was unyielding. By precept and com-

mand he forced education upon his son, thereby making him different from the two younger Berkeleys. Only Edward, the eldest, had the slightest interest in books.

The tutor at the big house numbered Malcolm as the fourth of his pupils; James Douglas directed the boy's collateral education. He saw to it that Malcolm's knowledge of Latin was something more than superficial. He knew that the boy's one chance in this strange land was to know more—and to know it more thoroughly—than the men with whom he would one day associate. Since economic and social conditions made it extremely unlikely that Malcolm could ever become a planter, James Douglas desired that his son should be a lawyer or an engineer or even a doctor. He must have a profession, and he must become an expert in it.

Malcolm's early life was pleasant, tranquil, and at times exciting. He became a magnificent horseman and a deadly shot. The Berkeley boys, who took physical courage for granted, recognized in their friend a quality of courage which merited—and received—applause. In boyish competition the young Berkeleys did foolhardy things, neither knowing nor caring that they were dangerous. Malcolm knew the danger and did them anyway. It was as though, without understanding, he sensed that the burden of proof was upon him.

His diet was varied, plentiful, and typical. Every morning there were hominy grits—though in South Carolina it wasn't called that, but just plain hominy—which was served, not with cream and sugar as they did up North, but with butter or gravy or some relish: tiny boiled shrimps, for example, or grated cheese. Steamed rice was the staple for the heavy dinner served at three in the afternoon.

In season he ate shad from the Santee River. He was fond of Charleston whiting and porgy and red snapper. He ate steak and roast beef, always too well done, and with the first frosts which marked hog-killing time there started a period of ham and bacon and sausage which was smoked right there on Big Cypress.

The big vegetable garden produced spinach and the stepsisters of spinach, mustard and turnip greens, peas, sweet corn, white potatoes, yams, and carrots. Mrs. Douglas made delectable hotbreads, her thin biscuits being like pastry. She made corn sticks, corn pone, muffins, popovers, and Sally Lunn that was like cake. She put up quantities of jams and jellies and delectable pickles, the finest of which were jerusalem artichokes which looked like little white potatoes and were crisp and pungent.

There were all the other usual dishes: Hoppin' John on New Year's Day, domestic-turkey on Thanksgiving, wild turkey and partridge and doves and rice birds in season, venison and duck when

the hunting was good. There were pies and cakes and tarts and a jelly made from wild haw berries which were similar to small guavas. There were huge, sweet strawberries in the spring, and wild blackberries. And, perhaps best of all, was the dried shad roe.

They took the roe from fresh caught shad, salted it, and spread it out to cure in the sun. It was a long process, but the roe eventually became hard and tangy, and was delicious when cut up in tiny pieces and sprinkled on hominy.

And of course James Douglas maintained the tradition of oatmeal. He could not entirely forget that his own boyhood had been spent in another land.

Life flowed pleasantly for young Malcolm Douglas. His father asked no favors and expected none. He saw to it that his son had those things which the other boys owned—a horse, a dog, a gun, plenty of ammunition.

Mrs. Douglas died in 1850, when Malcolm was seven. There was a fine and solemn funeral as she was laid away in the yard of the private chapel on Big Cypress, but thereafter James Douglas was not alone, because he had his son. He engaged a couple, Maum Ella and her husband, Sam, to take care of his place and of the boy, and, while his life was neither so full nor so happy as when his wife was living, it was still pleasant.

And so it was until the Christmas season of 1856 when Edward Berkeley, then sixteen, and a freshman at South Carolina College in Columbia, came down for his vacation, bringing a host of friends. There were other young folks, too, from Charleston and the sea islands thereabouts. Children of other planters showed up every day during the Christmas holidays, and at night the big house was gay with the scraping of fiddles, with dancing and games and merry-making.

To these affairs Malcolm Douglas was not invited.

True, he was only thirteen at the time, but, by the same token, Austin was twelve—and Austin attended all the evening affairs, enjoying himself each night until he got sleepy. And Logan Berkeley, who was fourteen and already beginning to stretch into a gawky young man, was very much in attendance.

For the first time in his life, Malcolm was not a part of the life of Big Cypress. For the first time he was on the outside. Ostracized.

Such a thought had never occurred to any member of the Berkeley family. Their program had not been decided upon after family council. It was merely beyond thinking that they should introduce a young man to their guests and say, "This is the son of our overseer." Or to introduce him and say nothing, and then to have Mal-

coln, in boyish ignorance of any social difference, explain his own status.

He could have ridden with them, hunted with them. He could not attend their parties.

He didn't know what was happening. He had not the faintest idea of why he was excluded. Yet there was an instinct which kept him from inquiring. Something was wrong. Something was different, and he knew that it was basic and important.

That was the beginning. For two years it went on that way, and as Malcolm grew older and wiser and commenced to analyze for himself, a great sense of helplessness, and of resentment, developed in him.

At fifteen he was better educated, more intelligent, than either of the two younger Berkeleys. He was quiet, reserved, well-mannered, courageous. He could do even better than they all the things by which they set such store. And he withdrew from their lives, removed himself from the big house, and took upon himself the problems and the loneliness which had once been his father's. He was no longer bewildered. It was all too clear now, all too inevitable.

The odd thing about it was that Logan and Austin Berkeley worried about him. They were hurt and bewildered. They concluded that they unwittingly had given offense, and they apologized without knowing why they apologized.

Left alone, even though of his own choice, Malcolm devoted himself to thinking and reading. He still borrowed books from the library at the plantation house. He did so because he wanted the books and because there was no other way of getting them. It was a bitter compromise, but a sensible one.

He drank up all the knowledge his father could impart and quested eagerly after more. And for his days outdoors he sought the companionship of Sam, the big Negro who was married to Maum Ella.

It was Sam who taught Malcolm to throw knives.

Sam was big and black and powerful. He had a ready smile and a booming laugh. He was fond of the boy, perhaps because he knew how fond Malcolm was of him.

Sam had an instinct for knife throwing. He'd practiced it for years, developing his own technique and an uncanny accuracy. He was delighted to find a pupil, and when, in the course of a few months Malcolm developed a skill which equaled that of his teacher, Sam was elated.

What he didn't understand was the earnestness with which Malcolm practiced. The young man had a half-dozen throwing knives

now, and when he wasn't reading or helping his father he was out in back of Sam's house flicking the heavy, shining blades at targets which daily became smaller and more difficult.

Malcolm never explained; his expression remained impassive. And Sam, not being a mind reader, could not know that in this solitary pastime, in this development of a new and unusual skill, Malcolm was finding an emotional outlet.

Within a year Sam had ceased to be a competitor. He sat back on his huge haunches and watched with pride the uncanny skill of his young protégé. He told his wife that it was wonderful but that there was something about it he didn't like. "Seems as if Marse Malcolm was th'owin' them knives at folks, not jes' at trees."

Maum Ella told him he was crazy.

"I ain't crazy." Sam frowned and shook his head. "The look he gits on his face, 'tain't like jes' tryin' to do somethin'. It's sort of like somethin' was hurtin' him, an' he was gittin' even. Ise sorry I ever taught him."

Logan and Austin learned of Malcolm's new skill. They saw, admired, and even imitated. But after a while they gave up trying to be as skillful as Malcolm. To them, it made no sense. Shooting: that had a reason. But who would ever want to throw knives?

They went away, leaving Malcolm alone with his practice. And as they disappeared, Malcolm hurled his knives again so that the blades whirled more brightly in the sunshine, and plunged deeper into the unoffending trunk of the target pine. And sometimes, on such occasions, the blades went in so deep that Malcolm had difficulty pulling them out.

It was then that he felt a sense of power amounting almost to exaltation.

XXIII

IN THE FALL of 1859, when he was sixteen, Malcolm matriculated at the Citadel in Charleston. A strict military academy, it was regarded by South Carolinians as being the peer of Virginia Military Institute. The uniforms, both fatigue and dress, were identical with those of West Point, and while its scholastic standards may have been less high and its instruction in military tactics less thorough, it still ranked as one of the two best military schools south of Washington.

Malcolm welcomed the anonymity of his cadet uniform. At the Citadel he was no different from all other first-year cadets. He was grateful to his father for sending him, and it never occurred to him to wonder whether any financial sacrifice had been entailed. It wasn't that he was thoughtless, but rather that he was eager to get away from Big Cypress and the sense of social inferiority which had been forced on him.

But he did not get away from it. He carried it with him, like a chip on his shoulder. On registration day he answered the query, "Father's occupation?" with the words "Plantation overseer." Less than two months after matriculating, he overheard one of the cadets say something derogatory about overseers as a type, without personal reference to Malcolm or to any other specific person. Malcolm introduced himself, stated that his father was an overseer, and slapped the face of the other cadet.

There was an arranged fist fight in one of the barracks rooms, with seconds and an upperclassman as referee. It was short and bitter, and Malcolm won. After the bout was over, he refused to shake hands with his defeated opponent. Thereafter his schoolmates were careful to make no overhearable reference to the profession of overseer; but Malcolm's attitude did nothing to bring popularity, however much it brought respect for his physical courage.

He avoided the few social functions which first-year cadets were permitted to attend. He continued to live within himself, to nurture the thought that he was different. The circumstance of his father's occupation grew out of all reason. It was a sort of inverted snobbishness, and, for the most part, it bewildered a good many of his classmates who would otherwise have liked him.

He was a fine, though not brilliant, student. He enjoyed the drills and the studies and even, eventually, some of his personal contacts. In the spring, when Friday afternoon dress parades were held on Marion Square and most of the young ladies came with their chaperons to watch the spectacle, Malcolm's heart was stirred.

At the end of the year, when the cadet appointments were announced, Malcolm was awarded a corporality—the highest rank he was permitted to attain in his second year. He spent a pleasant, quiet summer vacation at Big Cypress, fishing a good deal, doing some riding, enjoying long talks with his father, who was now beyond sixty years of age and suffering from rheumatism, and trying to forget, in a new sense of intellectual superiority, the feeling of inadequacy which seemed inescapable whenever he was with the Berkeley boys.

Logan had completed his first year at South Carolina College,

Austin was preparing to enter in the fall of 1860, and Edward had graduated and was working with his father in the knowledge that he would, before long, be called upon to assume full charge of Big Cypress. Mrs. Carolina Ravenel Berkeley had long since joined other members of the family in the chapel burying ground, she having been killed by a fall from a horse two years previously, and so there were only men on Big Cypress that summer: the four Berkeleys and the two Douglasses.

James Douglas let his son fight his own battle. He discerned an improvement after the year at the Citadel, and was proud of the record the boy had made. Though he felt a sense of responsibility, he did not try to do anything about it. He wished that Malcolm were less sensitive, yet he understood his sensitiveness.

The second year at the Citadel was better. Malcolm donned his corporal's chevrons and assumed the pride and dignity of one who was no longer a first-year man. He was assigned a squad to drill, and was observed with approval by his cadet company commander and by the commandant.

During the Christmas vacation he found Big Cypress gripped by a new excitement. The three Berkeley boys talked about nothing except secession and States' rights and the damn' Yankees. Whereas Colonel Sumter Berkeley (who actually had been a lieutenant of volunteers in the Mexican War, and had been partly crippled by a wound at Buena Vista) and James Douglas feared war, the younger men welcomed the prospect and hoped that no compromise would be reached. War was something with which they were not familiar, and its prospect was therefore glamorous. They felt closer than they had been in years. The three young Berkeleys deferred to Malcolm. With his year and a fraction at the Citadel, he was regarded as a military expert. They pledged themselves to enlist in the same unit when war came. It would be cavalry, of course, and they felt sorry for the Yankees who might some day encounter them on the battlefield. The Berkeleys had a vague and grotesquely inaccurate idea of war; Malcolm saw it in terms of drills and dress parades at the Citadel. Of course, they weren't fools: they conceded that there would be a certain element of danger; but all four were overcharged with courage, and that phase of the prospective adventure they welcomed.

In the spring came the affair at Fort Sumter. South Carolina had long since withdrawn from the Union, and at the Citadel all studies except tactics and mathematics were relegated to the background. There was some talk of the cadets enlisting in a body, and Malcolm was considering joining them until Logan Berkeley appeared at the school and reminded him of his promise to enlist with them.

Logan and Austin had left the college in Columbia, too excited to waste time on useless studies. And Logan told Malcolm that Mr. Wade Hampton of Columbia had been commissioned a colonel by Governor Pickens and had undertaken to raise his own military organization which, though not yet beyond the theoretical stage, was known as Hampton's Legion. All arms of the service would be represented, and a cavalry company was being organized in the area surrounding Big Cypress. Would Malcolm join? He certainly would. He was just as much native South Carolinian as they, and in the frantic talk of war and campaigns and battles and discomfiture for those people who already were referred to as the enemy, he lost, temporarily at least, the sense of difference between himself and the three boys with whom he had been raised.

On the third day of May, Colonel Wade Hampton, who was the wealthiest planter in South Carolina and perhaps in all the South, advertised in the *Charleston Courier* for a thousand men of all arms to be organized into a Legion. The Legion, stated the advertisement, was to include six companies of infantry, four troops of cavalry, and one battery of flying artillery. The Legion would abandon its status as State troops and offer its services to the Confederacy. Its field officers, from Hampton on down, would be commissioned in the Confederate Army by President Jefferson Davis and the line officers would be elected by each company. Within a single week the roster was full, and the Berkeleys and Malcolm Douglas were enrolled in the cavalry unit.

The organization meeting of their own troop was held at Big Cypress. Colonel Berkeley, who was too crippled to serve, presided, James Douglas, grave, unsmiling, too old for service, and having, moreover, a background and tradition of war and an instinctive knowledge of its ugly side, acted as secretary.

The meeting was tense, exciting, and very much like a superlative picnic, except that no ladies were present. All of the young men from nearby plantations had come roaring to the meeting on their finest horses, as though to prove by an unnecessary display of horsemanship that they were perfect cavalry material. There was an aura of new intimacy, of equality, of high adventure. Even Malcolm, keeping in the background by habit, was greeted with vast enthusiasm by those who knew him.

The troop roster was signed eagerly, impetuously, and with flourish, and the election of officers began. Edward Berkeley was chosen as one of the lieutenants, though his only knowledge of military command had to do vaguely with tales told by his father, and involved fighting Mexicans.

Next came the election of sergeants, then of corporals. When nominations were requested, Logan Berkeley rose. He said they had a young man with them who already was the beneficiary of military training. He stated that this young man could outride and outshoot any of them, and that he already held the rank of corporal in the corps of cadets at the Citadel. It gave him great pleasure and pride, therefore, to nominate as corporal his friend Malcolm Douglas.

For the first time in years a thrill of pride, of achievement, and of position suffused Malcolm. He heard the cheers that greeted the nomination and, when the balloting had been completed, found his name heading the list of appointees. He did not at that moment think back on the unhappiness and frustrations of the immediate past. He had been accepted and acknowledged by the sons of plantation owners; he, an overseer's son, had been made a noncommissioned officer.

The Legion assembled at Columbia and went into camp. Most of the young gentlemen were accompanied by their Negro body servants and had brought with them valises and trunks containing all manner of things to ensure their comfort. The cavalymen furnished their own horses, the finest stock in the southeastern part of the State. Organization was completed and drills were started.

Captain B. J. Johnson, of Charleston, rode magnificently into camp with all of the Washington Light Infantry of Charleston behind him, and was promptly appointed second in command of the Legion. Captain Stephen D. Lee was designated commander of the artillery battery. The cavalry troopers were furnished with rather inadequate straight two-edged swords, and the private soldiers were informed that they would be paid by the Confederate Government at the rate of \$12 a month.

The Legion was outfitted in gay, festive uniforms of gray with gold buttons and braid. They wore snug jackets, jaunty kepis, and magnificent shakos. They laughed and played and drilled and sang and regarded themselves very highly, and warfare itself as a chore which caused all this justification and was therefore worth while. That it could become serious never occurred to any of them.

In June of 1861, the Legion left the State, and on the 24th moved into camp at Rocketts, Virginia, which was just east of Richmond. There they were social darlings and paid off their obligations by giving the magnificent parades and fancy drills at which they were becoming adept.

The following month, at a little railroad junction called Manassas, the gay curtain rolled back and revealed to shocked young eyes what war could be.

Victory perched on the Confederate banner, the Yankees were routed, the war was presumed to be at an end.

But on the field of Manassas young men had looked for the first time on mass death and mutilation. They had seen and smelled war, and they recoiled from its horror. They sensed that the picnic days were over.

Malcolm and Logan came through brilliantly. But late that night, somewhere near the Henry House, they found the body of Austin Berkeley, born 1844, died 1861, aged seventeen.

XXIV

WAR CAUGHT THEM UP and carried them along inexorably. Gone was the pageantry, gone the pomp and panoply, gone the handsome shakos and gay kepis, gone the body servants and personal luxuries. Gone, too pitifully soon, was adequate nourishment for themselves and their mounts. They became hard eyed, quiet, dangerous, with greater respect for themselves and greater oh, infinitely greater—respect for their enemies.

They fought at Seven Pines, where Wade Hampton was wounded; they celebrated their commander's temporary appointment as brigadier general in November of 1861 (a commission which was not made permanent until months later), they went through the bitterness of the Seven Days, fighting most frequently as infantry; they distinguished themselves at White Oak Swamp, Frayser's Farm, and in the shambles that was Malvern Hill.

They welcomed a brilliant young West Pointer who was made commander of all the Confederate cavalry, Major General J. E. B. Stuart, and were elated when Wade Hampton was appointed senior brigadier. They somewhat resented the fact that Fitzhugh Lee, nephew of General R. E. Lee, was Stuart's favorite subcommander, and they welcomed into their command Brigadier General W. H. F. (Rooney) Lee, who was General Lee's son.

They no longer used the futile straight-edged swords, but equipped themselves with Northern cavalry sabers gleaned from bloody fields, and also appropriated modern revolvers which had been made in Yankee factories. By the middle of 1862 the enrolled strength of the Legion was 2,800.

Malcolm had been promoted to sergeant; Logan Berkeley had

refused even a corporalcy. War kept them shoulder to shoulder; it had brought them as close together as they had been as boys. Forgotten now, except in long hours of scouting and picket duty, were any memories Malcolm may have had of being the son of an overseer, of being anything save a soldier of the Confederacy. Seeing further and more clearly than most of the young men with whom he served, he felt that he was living at the end of an era, that no matter what the future held, it would be different from the past.

As a soldier, Logan Berkeley looked up to him. Logan was still a creature of impulses, enthusiasms, and gallantry. Malcolm more nearly saw war for what it was: a grim, ugly, bloody business. As his body thinned out and became more sinewy, more wiry, more capable of performing any required exertion, his eyes grew colder and harder, his determination more inflexible, his courage no less great but certainly less toolhardy.

In August of 1862, the cavalry of the Legion did a great deal of scouting. It moved into Maryland for the Sharpsburg campaign, and Malcolm and Logan participated in the bloodiest single day of the whole war, and then helped cover the retreat of an army which had not been defeated but merely forced to retire. In October they accompanied Hampton, who was second in command, while the plumed and belted knight, Jeb Stuart, rode clear around the Union Army of General McClellan, visiting Chambersburg and a little community called Gettysburg, a place which they were to see again.

They spent a cold, miserable, exciting winter raiding along the Rappahannock while the battle of Fredericksburg was being fought. And on June 9, 1863, after two days of elegant reviews and festivity, they learned for the first time that even Yankees can become cavalrymen, given sufficient incentive.

It happened at a place called Brandy Station. General Alfred Pleasanton outraged their sense of superiority by launching a brilliant attack and by succeeding in his tactical plan of throwing them off balance.

The battle was important in a general and a personal sense. It proved that Union cavalry must thereafter be reckoned with. It caused the death in battle of Frank Hampton, brother of their beloved general. It resulted in the death of Captain Edward Berkeley.

Of those who so gallantly and blithely had left Big Cypress, only Logan Berkeley and Malcolm Douglas survived. That alone made them feel like brothers.

Edward's death was a shock, even though death had long since lost its novelty. The two young men became more dependent on each other, and a couple of weeks after that, when Wade Hampton's

cavalry was designated the important rear unit of Jeb Stuart's command for a major excursion into Pennsylvania, Malcolm and Logan rode together.

Veteran campaigners that they were, they realized that this move was more important than anything they'd yet been engaged in. They went deeper and deeper into enemy territory, marveling at the richness of the countryside, fattening their horses, replenishing their own larders. There was a picnic spirit among the troopers.

Logan rode quietly, watching the face of his friend. Malcolm was easy in the saddle, his accoutrements clanking, a captured Spencer carbine ready to hand in case of emergency. Logan said, "You look troubled, Sergeant."

Malcolm smiled. When Logan called him by his military title, he knew he was supposed to smile. But the troubled look did not leave his quiet gray eyes.

"I don't like it," he said briefly.

"You don't like what?"

"This magnificent display of ours. This ostentatious gallantry."

"Well . . ." Logan was genuinely amused. "Will General Bonaparte kindly explain?"

"You know what this is all about, Logan. We're making our great gesture. We're supposed to frighten the Federals into suing for peace. But something is wrong. We're the eyes of the army, and we're not seeing anything but ourselves." His voice was bitter. "General Stuart is a great leader," he went on. "But he falls short of real greatness in one way: He's continually having to prove himself to himself. He's smarting under the ignominy of that affair at Brandy Station. He was reduced in stature. He's trying to restore it so that once again the Confederacy can ring with applause for him."

Logan's eyes grew serious. "That's pretty strong language, isn't it, Malcolm?"

"Why not? I don't believe there's a man here who doesn't know in a general way what Lee has planned. We all know that Stuart was told to establish contact with Ewell's corps and to report on his findings. But no: that isn't what we're doing. We're riding around an army. We're always riding around an army. We've captured 125 wagons, loaded with supplies, and we're handicapped by them. We don't even know where Ewell is. We know nothing about Hill or Longstreet, or even whether General Lee's strategic plan has been changed. We're in enemy country. And this time Stuart has not only rendered us vulnerable, but he has also handicapped Lee."

Logan nodded. "I see what you mean," he conceded. "But we don't really *know* what Stuart has in mind. . . ."

"We can guess. He wants his great black plume to be seen in un-

expected places. I don't like it, Logan. Stuart's basic fault is that he doesn't realize that the enemy has learned how to fight."

"Personal ambition," murmured Logan, mopping his forehead against the intense heat of the late June day. "Don't all the generals have it?"

"We'd do better if they had less." Malcolm shrugged. "Let's drop it. I may be wrong."

"But you think you're right, don't you?"

"Yes. What difference does it make, though? If Stuart is wrong, if Lee is wrong, it merely brings the end that much closer."

"You think we're going to lose?"

"Yes."

Logan threw back his head and laughed. It was his first genuine laugh since the death of his older brother, and it seemed to do him good. He said, affectionately, "You're hard to figure sometimes, Malcolm. There have been periods when I haven't been able to understand you at all. Then, at other times, you're so direct and frank that you startle me."

The eyes of the young men met through the cloud of dust which rose from the hoofs of the horses and spread a great dun blanket over the neat farms, the trim, freshly painted buildings, the flourishing crops of the Dutch countryside.

"You're a damn' fool for courage," Logan went on. "You criticize our revered generals." He showed a flash of rare insight. "What are you trying to prove, Malcolm?"

The other man looked startled, then composed himself. "I?" he parried. "I'm not trying to prove anything."

"I beg to disagree. You've been trying to prove something ever since you were a kid. Why not tell Uncle Logan?"

Malcolm frowned, opened his lips to answer, reconsidered, and was silent. "You're too observant," he commented, smiling so that there appeared to be no bitterness. "Too observant, and not observant enough."

XXV

STUART'S CAVALRY did not reach Gettysburg until the battle had been lost. Lee's army had fought without its cavalry, without its eyes. Stuart, forced to abandon the 125 wagons which had so hampered him, dashed gallantly toward the great battlefield in a brilliant, if

belated, attempt to take the Union Army in the rear. He encountered his old adversary, Gregg, and met with a remarkable lack of success. Lee's army had fought without the help of the cavalry, without knowing the strength or disposition of the enemy forces, without essential reconnaissance. When it was all over, Lee generously assumed full personal responsibility. But he knew that Stuart's gallantry, his intrepidity, was one of the major causes of his failure.

July, 1863, and the Confederacy was lost. Strategy had failed, tactics had failed. From there on it became a grim, losing fight: a fight against a stronger and better army, an army which had more food, more equipment, better horses, better armament, more men.

Malcolm and Logan saw action at Bristoe Station; they shared in Hampton's brilliant victory over Kilpatrick in the affair which was to become known as the Buckland Races; they participated in the Mine Run campaign along the Rapidan.

Logan Berkeley, despite his protests, was promoted to sergeant. Malcolm was commissioned a lieutenant. He tried to conceal his elation. To have a command, however minor, was secondary in importance. What really mattered was that he was an officer of the Confederacy, officially a gentleman, by order of the President. Outwardly, he did not change, save perhaps for a greater confidence in himself, a greater assurance. He made light of it when he was congratulated by Logan, and smiled when Logan made an elaborate ceremony of saluting him every time they met; but underneath there was something that was important to him, more important than anyone like Logan Berkeley could ever understand.

Malcolm pretended he didn't care, but he did care. That he was a good line officer was incidental; that he held a commission was important. He had been selected because he was a good soldier, because the right sort of officer material had been strewn over bitterly contested fields from Five Forks to the latest little skirmish. "Lieutenant Malcolm Douglas." He said it over and over to himself, savoring the sound, the feel of it. No matter what happened, no matter what the future might hold, he could look back on these days—if he survived—and say, "I was an officer in the Confederate cavalry."

In March of 1864, the Federal forces passed under the command of a general named Ulysses S. Grant. He wasn't a brilliant general, perhaps not even a fine one, but he was a fighter. And a fighter—a man who would give battle whenever and wherever the opportunity offered—was the one sort of person against whom Lee could not hope successfully to contend. The Confederates won great victories at Cold Harbor, at Louisa Court House, on other fields. "A few more such victories," exclaimed Robert E. Lee, "and we are ruined."

A man named Philip Sheridan assumed command of the Federal cavalry. On the 12th of May, 1864, Jeb Stuart was killed. Wade Hampton was given command of the Confederate cavalry, but now the men in gray were the equal of their opponents only in courage. Too many irreplaceable men had been killed. Despite his faults and his flamboyance, there was no replacing Jeb Stuart, just as there had been no replacement for Stonewall Jackson, who had been killed by his own men at Chancellorsville.

Fierce, hopeless fighting. Misery, unutterable weariness, desolation; and still they fought on. A Union general named Sherman ripped and tore through the heart of the South until there remained no more than a bleeding skeleton of what had been the Confederacy. On April 9, 1865, General Lee surrendered to General Grant. On the 26th of that month, General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered. Wade Hampton, by then a lieutenant general, surrendered three days later. The war was over.

From their surrender point in North Carolina, Malcolm Douglas and Logan Berkeley rode home together. They rode slowly because their mounts were scrawny and weak. They themselves were lean and hard and injured to most of the shocks which young men can experience.

But they were not prepared for the scenes of devastation through which they passed as they progressed slowly, wearily, toward Big Cypress. They were not prepared—they could not have been prepared—for what greeted them when they got home.

The acres which had been Big Cypress were still there; the land itself, and that was all. The fields were neglected and overgrown with weeds; the slave quarters had been destroyed; the overseer's cottage where Malcolm had been raised was a pile of ashes. A chimney and a few gaunt, charred columns were all that was left of the plantation house.

Sam came to greet them. He was still a big man, but his walk was no longer steady, there was no smile on his lips. He gave them his news without preamble. James Douglas was dead. Colonel Berkeley was dead. There had been a brief, unimportant fight at Big Cypress. Sherman's route toward Columbia had not led directly by the plantation, but bummers had been there. They had burned and pillaged. Malcolm's father and Logan's father had fought them, and had been killed, a final futile sacrifice to a lost cause.

The young men looked at each other, then turned away so that their eyes would not betray too much. And as Malcolm surveyed the desolation, the waste, the weed-ridden acres, the charred timbers which had been houses, he realized that the world had changed.

There was no overseer now. There would be no overseer because there was nothing to oversee. He and Logan were equal: neither had anything.

They moved into a miserable little cabin near the edge of the piney woods, and Sam tried to care for them. They were lost and bewildered. There was nothing. Nothing. The few neighbors were half starved and utterly hopeless. Already the influx of carpetbaggers and scalawags had commenced. The Freedmen's Bureau started operation. There was no one to help them work, no one who was permitted to work.

They themselves were disfranchised, bankrupt, helpless residents of a section which was to be treated as conquered territory. Abraham Lincoln, who wished to be their friend, had been assassinated by a fanatic, and the last hope of the South vanished.

Malcolm and Logan had looked upon gory battlefields, had served valorously, had suffered grief and wounds and hunger and privation, and they had stood what they had to stand.

But this was more than they could bear; this was defeat beyond defeat; this was the end of the world.

And then one day an elderly, well dressed man drove up from Charleston in a bright, shiny buggy and inquired for James Douglas. He was told that James was dead but that his son, Malcolm, was available. He found Malcolm and introduced himself as Bruce Douglas, Malcolm's uncle.

He brought good news. He gave to Malcolm \$3,000 in gold. It was money which had been sent him before the outbreak of hostilities by James Douglas. He had come personally to return it, and now that James was dead he gave it to Malcolm. He remained briefly and then went his way, and Malcolm sat down with Logan Berkeley.

"We've got \$3,000," he said.

Logan smiled thinly. "You have, not we."

"What's the difference? I consider it ours. What do we do with it?"

They agreed on one thing instantly. They were going away. Anywhere, so long as it was not here. They talked of Mexico and of Texas. And then they thought of California, and that was their answer.

They knew nothing about California except that it was a new land, a land of opportunity and of hope, a land where the Gods of War had not trodden.

Logan agreed to accept his expenses as a loan, ignoring Malcolm's insistence that he take the money as a gift. They left Big Cypress together, without a backward glance, with no word to express their grief. It had all been said. They were drained dry of emotion. The

past was dead, and as they turned westward it came to them that they were young and that they were headed into a future which could be whatever they chose to make it.

They went to Texas, they shipped to Panama. They crossed the Isthmus, and took passage to San Francisco. Eventually they sailed through the Golden Gate, and came to a land whose people had been interested in the war only as a conversational topic, as something scarcely more vital than politics, and not as personal.

Malcolm entered a law office as clerk and student. Logan found employment in a store that supplied equipment for men headed for the bonanza mines of a place called Nevada.

Logan lived happily and gaily, throwing off the effects of the four years of war. He found friends who wished to play poker, and he played skillfully and fearlessly. He earned enough to repay Malcolm the money which had been lent him for the trip west.

In the course of his work and his social activities, Logan heard more and more about a place called Virginia City. The stories he heard were fantastic. It sounded like the sort of place where he belonged. He hated clerking.

Fifteen hundred dollars remained of the money Malcolm had got from his father through his uncle. Fifteen hundred and a trifle more than that. It was with that money that he grubstaked Logan Berkeley and sent him upriver to Sacramento and thence to the Comstock.

He considered it a mad venture, with slim promise of success. He heard from Logan when that young man made his way over the Sierras to Virginia City in the spring of 1866. He heard later that Logan had invested their money in a mine which he had named Big Cypress. There was no falgia and fine irony in the selection of the name.

In the spring of 1867, Malcolm got another letter from Logan, enclosing the deed to Big Cypress with the rueful statement that it had been in borrasca from the very first day, and promised to remain that way. The money was gone. The gamble had been interesting but fruitless.

Logan was remaining in Virginia City. The place was new and different and exhilarating, he said. He urged Malcolm to join him to complete his law studies and come to the Comstock as an attorney.

Malcolm ignored the suggestion. And he did not think of it again until the early summer of 1868, when he read in one of the San Francisco newspapers that among the smaller bonanzas on the Comstock was a tiny mine known as the Rattlesnake.

It was earning a thousand dollars a day, said the newspaper. And it belonged to a man named Logan Berkeley.

Malcolm wrote and received no answer. He decided to investigate for himself. He read everything available about Virginia City, and eventually set out, determined to have a showdown with Logan.

Because he had little money of his own, a law clerk's salary being small, the necessity faced him of finding a way to reach Virginia City and to stay there. Through a friend he learned of a troupe which was planning a long stay in the Nevada wilds. He found Professor Carmichael and inquired whether he'd consider using a knife thrower. The Professor most certainly would.

For three days Malcolm practiced. The eye was still there, and the flexibility of wrist returned rapidly; the essential steadiness of nerve he had never lacked. On the fourth day he demonstrated his skill to Mom and the Professor, and was engaged.

And on the same day he met Althea Carmichael and commenced the new and interesting process of falling in love.

XXVI

THE FIRST HEAVY SNOW of the winter was spreading a mantle of white over Virginia City.

Malcolm Douglas put on a heavy coat, wrapped a scarf about his neck, pulled an old felt hat down over his eyes, and walked out of the mansion, closing the door carefully behind him.

He stood on the narrow veranda, letting his eyes get accustomed to the weird night light. He'd seen snow, plenty of it, but never a snow so heavy and persistent as this. There was something implacable about the big white flakes.

The jagged peaks and yawning ravines were only faintly discernible in the eerie light. All sense of distance had been blotted out by the snow; it was one never-ending swirl of whiteness, accentuating the isolation of the town.

Malcolm walked to the corner of Taylor Street and turned down the steep declivity toward the center of town. The snow patted against his face with gentle persistence, and then, suddenly, a wind sprang from nowhere and whistled through the streets, causing a ghostlike howling and a rattling of windows and doors.

The gale had personality. It whipped around corners and whirled in grotesque, wraithlike patterns in the air currents above the rugged contour of the earth. The snow no longer fell vertically, but slapped

at Malcolm's face from all angles at once. He was vastly impressed, and he recalled tales which had been told him of the horrible winters of 1859 and 1860 and the following year, long before there had been solid structures in Virginia City, when the town was a collection of ramshackle huts and lean-tos which were swept away by the fierce Washoe zephyrs, and when the only safe habitations had been caves cut into the mountainside. He hadn't believed half the stories he'd heard, deeming them the natural and excusable exaggerations of old-timers who were always pressing to enhance their own importance by elaborating the hardships they had survived. Tonight, knowing that this was a snowfall that perhaps would not even rate the designation of "storm," he began to believe.

No matter how the snow swirled and eddied, its general direction appeared to be toward the tremendous ravine which stretched eastward and was known as Six-Mile Canyon. He'd heard Comstock veterans tell of the early days when everything that was not pegged down tightly in Virginia City (and few things were) would be caught up in the powerful jaws of hurricanes and tossed eventually into the big canyon. The Paiute Indians, so the story ran, used to wait for the big winter winds, and at the first sign of them would move en masse to the canyon and wait patiently for treasures to fall into their arms: bits of tents, articles of clothing, cooking utensils, miscellaneous possessions. And when the gale had subsided and the hillsides had been stripped, the Paiutes would appear in the streets of Virginia City proudly displaying their treasures or swapping them for money with which to buy whisky.

Malcolm shivered as the wind bit into him, and he marveled that the people endured it. And then he smiled as he thought of how snug and comfortable the city must now appear to those who had lived there during the early bonanza years. He understood for the first time why the town was so heavily populated with Washoe widowers—married men whose wives abandoned them with the first touch of winter and went "below," which is to say that they traveled across the Sierras before the passes were blocked, and remained in the Sacramento Valley or San Francisco until things were clear and safe again, which was never until mid-May or early June.

He marveled, when he reached the middle of town, that the snowfall seemed to make so little difference. There was a new bleakness, a new harshness, but the pedestrians did not seem unduly concerned. They bent their heads against the drive of the snow, but otherwise they went about their business with rugged indifference, as though this were merely an unimportant rehearsal for what would come later.

The cold wind, the snowflakes that swished against his face, and

the necessity for care in picking his way had a tonic effect on Malcolm. There were no cobwebs on his brain now.

And there were many important things to think about. He had walked away from the snugness of the mansion and the group gathered about the wood fire in the parlor. Time for decision was approaching; the first phase of his existence in Virginia City was nearing its end.

Tomorrow night the opera house would again be available, and the Carmichael troupe was reopening for a final week. Box-office receipts had dropped sharply. Starved as Comstockians were for entertainment, they could not take the same entertainment forever. Even so, Brian Boru O'Mara had prophesied that the final week would be prosperous.

And after that? They hadn't talked of much else for a couple of weeks.

The Carmichael family definitely intended to remain in Virginia City. The Professor was doing very well indeed with his Elixir of Eternity, and, what was more, as an informal practitioner of the science of medicine he had assumed a position of some importance. For the first time in his life he was a citizen of note. He was welcome in homes and in bars, and if an undue proportion of his time was spent in the latter, that was his business. And Mom's, of course. But Mom never seemed to object to anything that kept her husband happy.

It was at bars that Brutus Carmichael talked, constantly and loudly. He did more than talk. he gossiped. And for some time past his choicest morsel of gossip was what he was pleased to designate as the feud between Malcolm Douglas and Logan Berkeley.

Echoes had reached Malcolm's ears. He remonstrated with the Professor, and got exactly nowhere. "You and Berkeley ain't friends any more, are you, Malcolm?" Carmichael asked.

"No-o."

"He stole your half of the Rattlesnake, didn't he?"

"That's a matter of viewpoint, Professor."

"The boys all say you got a right to half of everything Logan Berkeley has. They know you came here to get it. They ask me what you're figuring to do."

"Look, Professor. I'm not planning to do anything."

"Then why are you staying on in Virginia City?"

"I like it here."

"Ha!" The Professor's round, bright little face lighted triumphantly. "You say one thing and act another. Well, son, I'm telling you: I know what's on your mind. I know you ain't the sort of a man

to sit idle while another feller gets rich off what belongs half to you. And no matter how often you tell me different, that's the way I see it."

The Professor's friends invariably pressed him for the latest news about the feud. Had it come out in the open yet? Did he know what Malcolm was planning? Was it possible that Malcolm would continue to stand passively by while his enemy fattened on money that was rightfully his?

They shrugged off the strictly legal angle. Courts did not necessarily—or even often—dispense justice. Not on the Comstock they didn't. This was something which had to be settled on a personal basis.

"All hell's goin' to bust loose," declared a slightly inebriated oracle as he draped himself over the bar in the Sawdust Corner saloon. "An' when it does, I want to be there to see it. My money's ridin' on Douglas."

And Malcolm himself had the uncomfortable feeling that the situation could not smolder indefinitely—not without bursting into flame.

XXVII

THE SHOW OPENED its final week triumphantly. The house was sold out. The spectators had all seen it before, but they were there because they knew that they might not see it again. They plowed through the first big snow of the winter to the Opera House to applaud the beginning of the farewell week of the Capemichael troupe.

The performers had discovered a new zest, a new vigor. There was always enthusiasm at the beginning of an engagement, there was equal enthusiasm when an engagement was ending. They intended to close in a blaze of glory, no matter what the future might hold, no matter how soon they'd be forlornly searching for other engagements or, for that matter, for any sort of work.

During a week of layoff, new things had been added to the show: new songs for Barbara Hamilton, new jokes for Manny Hirsch, and a windup which had been tried out a half-dozen times previously and had elicited a good deal of hilarity.

It had been Mom's idea, really. It had seemed to her that closing the show with the throwing of the last knife at the living target which

was her daughter was a trifle abrupt. The audience never seemed quite prepared for the announcement that that was the end, that there was no more. So she had talked things over with the Professor, and one night, after Malcolm and Althea had taken their bows, the Professor had walked down to the footlights and asked for a volunteer to serve as target for some more knife throwing.

The request broke the tension. It brought huge guffaws from all over the house, and loud bellowings as this miner or that urged some friend to offer himself. There were no volunteers that first night, but the spectators went out chuckling.

The Professor—a smart showman—had kept it in. On several occasions men actually had volunteered, but they were invariably drunks whose offers were refused.

The performance went smoothly on the first night of the closing week. Manny and the Professor had both been around Virginia City and Gold Hill long enough to have absorbed the flavor of local humor, and their comedy was interspersed with sly references to things which were peculiar to the Comstock, which smacked of one insider talking to another, and which inevitably brought boisterous laughter.

The knife-throwing routine went smoothly. Never had Althea looked lovelier or more desirable. Never had she seemed more courageous or less affected by the very real danger she faced unblinkingly with the hurling of each wicked knife.

Malcolm went through the performance smilingly, easily. Clad in his customary black trousers and loose white shirt open at the throat, he worked easily, without tension.

Then it was over. The audience acclaimed the art with that brief period of silence which was its greatest tribute. Then there was an outburst of thunderous applause. A few spectators got up to go, but most of them waited, eager to enjoy the announcement which they knew the Professor was about to make.

It was very funny indeed. The stubby, roly poly little man with the wide, shining face and the merry eyes frolicked down to the stage apron and asked for volunteers. He made his request in the same manner he had employed since the night he had introduced the feature. He explained that there really was no reason why some one shouldn't offer himself. Of course, he went on, the knives were heavy and dangerous, but actually there was a minimum of risk. Statistics, he said, were on the side of the volunteer. Not more than half a dozen had been killed in the past several weeks.

It was old stuff to most of the spectators, but that didn't seem to make it less hilarious. There were the usual loud urgings from the

audience, the customary good-natured badinage. The Professor flashed his cherubic smile and said: "I am, indeed, disappointed. I had hoped for at least one volunteer. . . ."

He felt the sudden quiet which fell over the house, a sharp, astonishing return of tension, an indrawing of breaths in chorus, as though rehearsed. His instinct caused him to know that something important had happened or was about to happen.

He heard the murmur of excitement, the buzz of conjecture. He heard the voice of a man he couldn't see. The voice said, "Well, I'll be damned!" The Professor heard Althea draw in her breath sharply, and he heard Malcolm's whisper "Good God, no!"

Then he saw. He saw a tall, lithe, confident figure moving easily and gracefully down the aisle toward the stage. He saw the smiling lips, the steady eyes of Logan Berkeley.

Logan vaulted onto the stage and shook hands with the Professor. He was utterly at ease, relaxed, unperturbed. He said something which the spectators could not hear, but now the audience murmur had crescendoed into a roar which beat upon the ears of the Professor like the thunder of Niagara.

Here was something the audience understood, here was something it loved. Here was stark drama, concentrated and staged. It was grotesquely exciting. It revived all the gossip they'd heard, every morsel of conversation which had circulated through the bars of C Street about the feud between Malcolm Douglas, who threw the knives, and Logan Berkeley, who was offering himself as target.

For weeks rumor had fattened on itself, until it had been distorted out of all proportion to fact. The huge majority of those in the theater regarded Malcolm and Logan as deadly enemies, they had believed—or pretended to believe—that sooner or later there would be a clash between the two men, and a killing.

For the most part they had favored Malcolm Douglas, but Logan's sheer effrontery, the magnificence of his gesture, won them over. They yelled and howled endorsement of what he was offering to do, and when the Professor shook his head they bellowed their protest.

Malcolm Douglas tightened inside. His eyes became narrow and cold. A great anger welled up within him, an anger which blazed into hatred as Logan caught his eye and smiled warmly.

Never before had Malcolm felt actual hatred for Logan. There had been a sense of social inferiority, a feeling that he had been deprived of something which was rightfully his, a resentment; but no emotion so positive as hatred.

Now, suddenly, that had changed. Logan's flamboyant gesture

made Malcolm's position impossible. Had Berkeley accosted him in a bar or on the street and passed an insult, there could have been a fight, perhaps a deadly one. But this: To insist on standing in front of the target board, to permit Malcolm to toss knives at him, to dare him to miss, to defy him to deflect one blade one inch—that was something that only Logan would presume to do.

It was a nerve-shaking test of courage. But more iron nerve was required of Malcolm than of Logan Berkeley. All the latter had to do was to stand there, motionless. Malcolm it was who had to throw the knives. He had to throw them hard and close; the crowd would not tolerate a missing of the target by any greater margin than he allowed himself with Althea.

Malcolm glanced into the wings. Stagehands gathered there, and the house manager was staring with apprehension. The members of the company were there too, faces tense with strain. Malcolm could see Manny Hirsch, his burnt cork not yet removed, moistening his comedy lips, pleading with his eyes. And what impressed him most was Mom Carmichael. She had dropped her crocheting and had risen from the little chair where she customarily sat. Mom's blue eyes were no longer placid.

The roar from the audience became subdued but no less insistent. Dog fights had been held on that stage and bare-knuckle prize fights. Audiences had witnessed bearbaiting and organized brutality. But never before had there been offered for their edification the spectacle of two men whom they believed to be mortal enemies confronting one another so dangerously: one armed only with casual, smiling courage; the active burden, and the onus, entirely on the other.

They knew that anything could happen, and they hoped it would. A knife could be deflected by little more than a hairbreadth, and even though the citizens would believe that murder had been committed they knew that murder could not be proved. Logan Berkeley had offered himself, the Professor and Malcolm Douglas were both protesting. What happened to Berkeley would be the result of a risk voluntarily assumed.

To watch possible murder in the making was a novelty even in so raw a community as Virginia City. And no matter what happened, the spectacle of iron nerve, of unflinching courage, was something which would be talked about for years to come. The theater was charged with drama. It was unbelievable and fantastic, even in a place where the unbelievable and fantastic had long since become commonplace.

Logan Berkeley removed his coat. He was wearing a white linen shirt and a black string necktie. His trousers were black and tight-

fitting, his costume astonishingly like that worn by Malcolm. Never for an instant had the smile left his lips. He was the least concerned person in the house, if one could judge by his demeanor. He was either indifferent to danger or unaware of it.

Malcolm knew all of the gossip which had flared through C. Street; he knew what the people in the audience were thinking. He knew that if he cared to hurl one knife straight at Logan, he'd be safe from legal consequences. The anger which boiled in him made the opportunity a temptation, but that was not his primary fear.

What he feared was that his own nerves would not stand up under the strain, he was afraid that the tension would ruin his coordination, that an accident would happen, and that no one would believe it was an accident—not the townspeople or the members of the troupe or even Althea.

The house was silent, as people are silent just before the trap is sprung at a hanging. For an instant Malcolm considered refusing pointblank to go through with the grotesque performance, and then he realized that he must. To refuse now would forever mark a difference between himself and Logan Berkeley which could not be overcome. If his nerve could not rise to this occasion, the failure would do him permanent harm.

Berkeley's casual manner, his placid assumption that everything would be all right, and his smiling acceptance of danger were important. They marked him as the sort of man the Comstock understood and admired. Failure to carry out his own part of the affair would stamp Malcolm as a weakling.

Still smiling, Logan walked over to the target board and pressed his tall figure against it. He extended his arms as he'd seen Althea do a score of times. He smiled easily, not triumphantly, not nervously, but as though this were the most natural situation in the world.

Calmly and quietly he said—and his voice was heard clearly in the sudden hush which had fallen on the spectators—"Go ahead, Malcolm."

Malcolm's lips were dry. He was tense where he should have been relaxed. He felt the sweat coming through the pores of his skin. He had a momentary impulse to throw one knife—just one—and to throw it straight at the man whom, at that moment, he had come to regard as his enemy.

He caught a glimpse of Althea. She had withdrawn into the wing and was standing next to her mother. Her eyes were steady and filled with a light which Malcolm did not, could not, fathom. She had made no move to prevent the occurrence, and she was making no

move now. She watched the two men with unblinking steadiness, just as she usually watched Malcolm from the target board each night before the first knife was thrown—except that now there was no slightest hint of a smile on her lips. When she was the target, she smiled to show that she was not afraid, that she had confidence in Malcolm. Now she could not smile because she *was* afraid, because, perhaps, she lacked confidence.

Logan stood waiting. The house was restive. The Professor finished talking to Malcolm, made a hopeless gesture, and walked into the wings. Mom looked a question, and he shook his head. "God-damn' fools!" he said unsteadily. "Both of them."

The burden was on Malcolm. He held the reins; he was the one of whom icy control was demanded.

Deliberately, he tried shutting the past out of his mind, tried to forget all the things—real and imaginary, right and wrong, justifiable and unjustifiable—that Logan had done to him. He tried to forget the barb of social difference which had rankled so deeply for so many years.

He faced his problem squarely. He had to prove himself to himself. He was no longer butting Logan Berkeley, but himself. He could succeed or he could fail. If he succeeded—if his knives flew true—Logan Berkeley would walk off with the credit for having displayed the greater courage. If he failed, Logan would know nothing about it, and Malcolm would be branded with the mark of Cain.

He had changed, inwardly and permanently, in the past few minutes. From now on there would be no doubt in his own mind about his feelings toward Logan Berkeley: there would be no hesitation about the lengths to which he would go to impress upon Logan the knowledge that war had been declared between them.

Malcolm moistened his lips and relaxed his muscles. And now he smiled a thin cold smile. Outwardly, his assurance matched Logan's. Inwardly, he was seething, knowing that an unfair advantage had been taken of him.

He picked up one of the knives, heated it, balanced it in his hand. He looked straight into Logan's calm black eyes, and he asked, "Ready?"

"Ready," answered Logan.

A hush was on the audience, tense, expectant, ghoulish. No murmur could be heard: no foot scraped the floor.

Malcolm concentrated. He drew back his arm, trying to forget that Logan Berkeley was his target, trying—though without success—to shut out all personal thoughts.

The knife flew from his hand. The blade flashed and spun through

the air. It thudded into the target board a scant quarter-inch from Logan Berkeley's left thigh. Logan's smile did not change, his eyes did not blink, his body did not quiver. A sigh escaped the audience.

With deadly calm, with utter concentration, despite the sweat that bathed him, Malcolm hurled another knife and then another and another. He had succeeded, by phenomenal effort, in coordinating his muscles.

And still the silence from beyond the footlights, still the hushed expectancy, still the smile on Logan's lips, still that immobility that amounted to effrontery.

Again and again and again Malcolm threw. He threw harder than usual, and the knives probed deep into the target board, where they clung quivering and whining.

Logan's legs were outlined, then his arms. Malcolm's hatred had grown, and with it his self control. He refused to let himself remember that he was afraid of what could happen.

A knife snapped into the board by the side of Logan's head, almost pinning his ear. Berkeley did not flicker an eyelid. Another and another. Close—terribly, dangerously close. The last one—a shining, flaming, whirling flash. It seemed destined for a spot directly between Logan's eyes. Then, at the ultimate moment, it finished its final circle and plunged into the board, almost ruffling Logan's hair.

There was a sigh from the spectators, ten seconds of utter silence then the faintest scattering of applause and a scraping of feet as the spectators started to file out. Some looked bewildered, some, relieved, the majority, disappointed.

Malcolm stood in the center of the stage looking out over the sea of faces. Reaction was setting in.

He walked to the wings and leaned against a table, steadying himself. His clothes were drenched with perspiration. He was vaguely aware of the members of the troupe staring at him. He saw Logan Berkeley approaching, still smiling. He braced himself.

XXV.III

THEY WERE ALL converging on Malcolm now, but he saw no one except Logan. He made an effort to stand straight, but the last ounce of strength seemed to have been drained from him. Only one emotion remained, and that was anger.

With Berkeley came the Professor and Mom and Althea and Manny Hirsch. Others remained in the background, faces drawn, eyes questioning. They knew instinctively that the last act of the drama was yet to be played.

Logan halted in front of Malcolm and held out his hand. He said, "Nice work."

Malcolm looked into the calm black eyes, ignoring the outstretched hand. He felt the beginnings of a fury which he had not dared to permit himself to feel out yonder. His face was chalky, his body tense.

"What was the idea?" he asked harshly.

Logan's good temper was unruffled. "Had to do it, Malcolm. You know that."

"Why?"

"Shuh! You must have heard the gossip that's been going the rounds. Every barfly in town is talking about the supposed enmity between us, speculating on what would happen if we ever got together. I had to prove publicly how wrong they were."

Malcolm waited coldly, saying nothing.

"What better way than to let them see for themselves?"

The shorter man stared at Logan implacably. He said, "I was tempted to kill you."

Logan laughed. "You're upset, Malcolm." His voice took on a faint nuance of apology. "You know, maybe I wasn't so reasonable at that. I never realized until I got up there that it might be a bit of a strain on you."

Malcolm was regaining control of himself, becoming more articulate. "You took a rotten advantage of me," he said. "It wasn't the first time."

"Now, wait a minute. Things aren't that serious."

"Aren't they?"

"Of course not. You've let yourself be carried away by gossip. You've become sensitive. Hell, you always were, for that matter. Now, look. I did this thing because it seemed to me to be the simplest and most logical way of letting the public know that we weren't enemies, that because we don't see eye to eye on that mine business we're not going to attack each other. I probably wasn't fair to you. I see that now. I apologize."

Malcolm said steadily, "I don't accept your apology."

The smile remained on Logan's lips, but now it was a trifle forced. "I tender it anyway, Malcolm. And I don't see why you persist in acting like a child. Let's forget the whole thing."

"It's not that simple. I prefer to remember."

Logan's eyes were smoldering. The Berkeley temper was being aroused. "You're making it rather difficult, Malcolm."

"I'm glad you understand that."

"We've been friends—"

"I used to delude myself into that belief."

Their glances locked. Logan's voice came, cold as Malcolm's, "Are you telling me we're enemies?"

"I'm not putting it that drastically, Logan. But I don't believe I care for your friendship. It has proved too expensive and untrustworthy."

The onlookers saw the color drain from Logan's cheeks. He said slowly, "I'd kill any other man in the world for saying that."

Malcolm stood quietly, ready and unafraid. His attitude was an invitation implied. Logan struggled with himself, then forced a smile.

"I refuse to fight with you, Malcolm. I refuse to lower myself to a barroom level. There's too much of the past that belongs to us both."

"Much too much."

"I did a stupid thing tonight. I didn't realize until now that it was stupid. I have apologized. You refuse to accept my apology. I refuse to accept your enmity."

Malcolm said, "That's your business. At least, you know how I feel."

Logan was thoughtful. He said, "I'm not even sure you know how you feel, Malcolm, or why."

"I feel," responded Malcolm, "that there's no point to pretending we're friends—or ever have been."

"I'm sure you're not threatening me."

"Your confidence is amusing, Logan. You could be wrong, you know."

Berkeley stepped back. He stared long and hard at the compact, agile figure of Malcolm Douglas. All warmth had gone from his eyes. "Have it your own way," he said. "I think you're acting childishly. But if that's how you want things to be between us, it's all right with me."

Malcolm inclined his head without lowering his eyes. "That's how I want them to be," he said. "From now on."

XXIX

THERE WERE THREE distinct phases of life on the Comstock, two of them picturesque and fairly well understood, the third not understood at all except by a small group of experts

The first phase was the life of Virginia City and Gold Hill, above and below ground. It was an existence of grim, hard, dangerous work and of hard, boisterous play. It was, below ground, a daily routine of thousands of men who worked, stripped to the waist, in stopes and galleries which were too hot, too dangerous, poorly ventilated, and, for the most part, improperly protected against cave ins.

There was no glamour to the work itself, despite the fact that the ore they blasted and dug and carted away was heavy with silver and gold. It was a case of labor at \$4 per eight hour day, under rigorous and almost impossible conditions that required muscular prowess and an utter indifference to danger. It was an existence in which the individual did not count. If a man lived, he lived, if he died, he died—and that was that. He might be missed by certain drinking companions, or he might not be missed at all. Death by accident was too commonplace to excite comment.

Most of all, the daily grind was not spectacular save in the fact that there is drama implicit in work which carries an overtone of constant danger. And, too, there was always the hope that, working in a country where there was so much latent wealth, any individual might uncover a lead of his own, might blossom forth one day as the owner of a small mine and thus be elevated from common laborer to capitalist. It had happened before, many times, and there was always the hope that it might happen again, although the hope was more forlorn than the men knew, for most of the potentially good workings were passing into the hands of the wealthy and shrewd.

Above ground, the city differed only slightly from any other rough mining community except that there was less restraint, a greater dependence on others because of isolation, primitive living conditions, and a harsh climate. True, the daily wage was fantastically high, and the men who earned it lived well and even luxuriously.

Along C Street the stores were stocked with goods which compared favorably with any in the United States, although the build-

ings themselves were narrow and dark and crowded. There was no spaciousness indoors; not in the restaurants, the shops, the saloons, the rooming houses.

The feminine population was disproportionately small, since most of the miners' wives could not successfully withstand the rigors with which they were forced to contend. Basically, it was a man's world, and the rules by which it was governed were masculine rules.

Strangers to the Comstock, looking for glamour, were swiftly disillusioned. True, there had been glamour in the early days—a trifle more than nine years ago—but that had, for the most part, vanished. Men and women who had come to the Comstock then were already legendary, even though they were still alive, and could be seen occasionally on the streets of Virginia City, or perhaps in Carson, or Reno.

The legends were always of success, never of failure; yet almost all of the pioneers were failures. You could have your future told by the Washoe seeress, one Eilly Orrum Bowers, and unless someone enlightened you, you'd never know that just a few brief years ago she and her husband had owned the Bowers mine in Gold Hill and had been worth more than a million dollars. People remembered Eilly as she had been in the golden days, wealthy and somewhat presumptuous, owning a mansion on the other side of the Washoe Range, a place of grotesque magnificence with hot and cold swimming pools and table service of solid silver for forty-eight persons. They could tell you, with great pride, of her trip to England to visit Queen Victoria, and of the dress that had been made for her presentation at Court. Of course, the presentation had never taken place, but that did not lessen the magnificence of the enterprise; nor did hope ever fade that what Eilly Bowers, an unlettered woman, and her husband, an inarticulate mule skinner, had done, they too could do.

Then, too, much had been told and written of the wild days on the Comstock, of bad men who murdered for the sheer joy of killing; of battles in the saloons along G Street in which either or both or all participants were slightly or seriously mutilated; of stage robbers and bank robbers; of rootin', tootin' gunfighters, of all the concentrated activity and danger of a wild, undisciplined country. Yes, much had been told about the early days, and much of it was basically true, although most of it had been exaggerated. Virginia City and Gold Hill had been wild—that was inevitable—but bad men and killers had not flourished. In this workaday world there was too little profit in it.

But the old-timers had no other way of proving their superiority

over those who had reached the Comstock at a later date. Stories were embroidered more and more fancifully with each telling so that even the tellers, who had known at first that they were lying, or at least exaggerating, came to believe their own falsifications facts of so recent occurrence as to have been common experience to many of them were already grotesquely distorted.

Of course, the harshness and wildness and violence were still there in 1868, and always would be. In any land which demanded fortitude and courage and great physical strength, in any land where there was a minimum of legal restraint and where one reckoned everything in terms of achievement rather than in the method of achievement, one could neither hope nor expect to find softness.

It was a miniature world of vulgar ostentation and poor taste, a world in which you were judged by what you could get away with without regard to how you accomplished it.

Men worked hard, gambled hard, drank hard, and fought hard. They ate the finest foods without knowing why they were the finest, judging merely by the standard that they were the most expensive.

There was the same lack of discrimination in their merrymaking. Those who gambled did so until their money was gone; those without wives found feminine companionship in the drafty, overcrowded houses of prostitution on D Street. There were legends, too, about prostitutes with hearts of gold, legends which somehow never withstood the rigors of a search for authentication. Somehow, it seemed, investigation invariably disclosed that the hearts of gold presumed to be possessed by the fallen ladies were on display exclusively for gentlemen who had pockets lined with gold. The average prostitute was prosperous, but she earned most of the wage she received, she was necessarily harder and tougher than her sisters in San Francisco or New York or Kansas City. She had to be.

It was a seething life, an active life, a dangerous and uncertain life, but it was glamorous only because it was different and because it was set against a wild background.

And the common denominator of personal relationship was indifference.

That was the phase of life on the Comstock that was visible to the eye of the visitor. The second phase was something he knew existed, that he talked about with a wisdom more assumed than actual, ~~and~~ which held out even more hope—with less justification—than the actual mining speculation in the stocks of the Comstock mines.

That was the gambling that really ran rife through the Comstock. There was more of it in a day than there was of wagering on faro or monte in a month. The talk was of bonanza and the possibility

of bonanza. Miners were questioned constantly and shrewdly for advance information about big strikes. Occasionally someone made a good guess and reaped a financial harvest, but usually such a guess—in the case of the common man—was sheer luck.

The manipulation of Comstock shares bore slight relation to actual conditions in the mines. The insiders ran the stocks up and down to suit their fancy; they cleverly spread rumors of bonanzas when they wished the stock to rise so that they could unload; they inaugurated stories of bonanzas when they wanted the stock to fall so that they could buy it in cheaply. It was virtually impossible to differentiate between what was true and what was false, and the miners themselves were the most gullible of all.

But there was a third phase, too, that had little or no relation to glamour or to the daily work of miners or to the cunning schemes of stock manipulators. It involved a small group of technically trained men: mining engineers, metallurgists, geologists.

They were an unglamorous group, well paid and forgotten. They lived a life apart from everybody else in the Comstock, and only a few recognized and appreciated their ability. It was they who sought for the key to the wealth which yet lay hidden under the barren surface, they who charted the course and depth and potentialities of the lode, they who scientifically attempted to estimate the long-range possibilities.

Only they could explain the geological conditions; only they understood the technical side. And, save to a few astute owners and superintendents, they did no explaining because the populace was bored by them; the people neither understood nor cared. They asked for conclusions, not theories, certainties, not possibilities.

When one of them was induced to talk, his listeners invariably found him dull. Only to another geologist or engineer was his technical jargon of interest; only to a trained man was it even intelligible.

The upper section of the lode had been an unsolvable puzzle to the early miners, and many years passed before even the best of them discovered that it might be advisable to look for ore in the nearly vertical fissures along the so-called east wall of the lode. It was not until after technically trained men came in to evaluate known facts and to derive logical conclusions from them that those in charge of the workings learned to drive long crosscuts toward the east through the porphyry horses and into the bodies of ore lying near the wall.

To the miner, silver was silver: it assayed high or it assayed low. He was supremely indifferent to the reports of the experts: that the

Comstock ores were in the sulphides—argentite, polybasite, and stephanite. He might have noted the statement that native silver occurred infrequently, but he wouldn't have known what it meant. He'd have read with interest—and some skepticism—that the gold was free. What did he care that the geology of the lode was different at the two ends—that in the north, where they had hit bonanzas at the Ophir and the Gould & Curry, there were always present some lead, zinc, antimony, and copper sulphides, whereas in the neighborhood of the Gold Hill bonanzas the ores were virtually free from base metals?

No, the average man cared nothing about details, he would not have understood the complicated maps which resulted from painstaking surveys and research. And because he did not, the researchers, the technically trained men, formed a little world of their own, a world within a world, a world based on causes rather than on results, a world wherein the value of the daily output was of secondary interest except as it bore out conclusions which had been reached scientifically. They spoke a language of their own, and, since their brains and their services could be hired, they were never accorded the credit that was rightfully theirs.

They were the men behind the scenes, the men of no importance, the unglamorous and the uncolorful, just as on another plane, the drudging housewives who struggled against enormous odds to make homes of their ramshackle dwellings, to raise children, to educate them, were taken for granted.

There were churches on the Comstock and pious folk, who attended them. There were schools and minor recreational facilities. There were small, unspectacular businessmen, there were milliners and seamstresses and waitresses and secretaries and clerks. But they were disregarded, just as the smallest cogwheels in a huge mass of machinery were disregarded, their presence being taken for granted, their functions accepted but not noted. Nothing held popular attention except the actual labor of bringing ore to the surface and the work of manipulating the stocks of the mines.

The Comstock was an area of superlatives, of extremes. The essential humdrum of daily routine was not spectacular, and therefore of no interest.

To own, to accumulate, to become wealthy, to make a blatant show of one's wealth, those were the only things that mattered.

XXX

THE FIRST REAL BLIZZARD of the year was in progress when Althea told Malcolm that she was going to marry Logan Berkeley.

They were alone in the great garish parlor of the O'Mara mansion on A Street. Outside, the premature dusk was intensified by the thick fall of snow. There were huge drifts on the lee side of all the buildings, and great gishes of ugly brown where the incessant winds swept the snow away as fast as it fell.

Althea had sought the interview. It would have been easier to delegate the task to another or to have made an announcement when there was a crowd. But that was not Althea's way.

In the semigloom she told him, her voice flat and unemotional. He looked down at her, his body tense, his lips compressed into a straight, bitter line. At length he spoke harshly.

"He's made a clean sweep, hasn't he, Althea? The mine, and now you."

She waited, knowing that he wouldn't let the matter drop there.

"You're not in love with him," he stated positively.

Still she did not speak.

"You're here wearing a price tag. Logan Berkeley was able to afford the price. Where will you live? On D Street?"

Little spots of color appeared on her cheeks. She said: "I don't want to quarrel with you, Malcolm. And you needn't act surprised. You've seen what's been happening."

"Naturally." There was a cutting edge of sarcasm in his voice. "Ever since that knife-throwing episode at the theater, I've seen, I trust Mr. Berkeley not to be scrupulous about it. I trust him to advertise his intentions like a gentleman. There was nothing furtive about the way he held all of a property that by rights was half mine. There was nothing furtive about the way he courted you." Suddenly a feeling of misery, of loneliness, suffused him. "Why did you do it, Althea? How could you? What has happened between us? The way we feel to each other—doesn't that mean anything?"

"Yes . . ." She refused to look away. "But it doesn't mean enough."

"Are you being fair to him?"

She smiled then, not derisively, but with understanding. "You're not concerned about Logan," she said. "Actually, the only satisfac-

tion you're getting out of this is that perhaps it is not fair to him."

He responded, as always, to her rare insight, to her deep knowledge of his character. "He won't be getting what he pays for. But somehow I can't find myself cheering over that. Whatever he gets, whatever it's worth . . . it is still something I hate to lose. When do you plan to marry?"

"Saturday. Here. Will you come?"

"Naturally. Why shouldn't I? I shall send a present, and I'll offer congratulations afterward, as a gentleman should. I will watch you pledge yourself to him, and I'll be sorry that I did not kill him when I had the chance."

She said hotly, "You have no right to blame him."

"I don't blame him. How can I blame a man for wanting you when I've always wanted you myself? No, I don't hold that against him. It was probably something you engineered, something he couldn't help. You are a very attractive girl, Althea. Here in Virginia City you're a rare jewel, and a hard one."

"Will you wish me happiness?"

"It wouldn't be any use. You won't be happy."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear, you're different, you two. You have a streak of magnificent commonness. Logan is accustomed to refinement."

She said, with another flash of keen perception. "The trouble with you, Malcolm, is that you don't know Logan Berkeley. Oh, I know you were raised with him, that you grew up together. But that isn't the Logan Berkeley I shall be marrying, that's not the Logan Berkeley of Virginia City. He has done something you've never done: he has adjusted himself to his new life. He has become the sort of man I admire, whether or not I love him. He came here with nothing, and now he's a rich man. He got that way by his own individual effort. He didn't lie down and let others walk on him. You could do worse than to profit by his example."

Malcolm said, "Go on."

"Logan cut away from his old life. You never have. He changed. You didn't."

"And you'd like me better if I had?"

"I like men who do things, who achieve success. No, it isn't just a matter of dollars and cents, it's something more important than that." She went on with a hint of anger. "If Logan felt that someone had done to him what you believe he did to you, he wouldn't accept it quietly. He might not win, but he'd fight."

"You've been reading too many romances, Althea. A man cannot

fight unless he has weapons to fight with. And he would be a fool to fight knowing in advance that he had no chance of success."

She sighed, moved close to the window, and looked down on the snow-blanketed city, its ugly outlines rendered less formidable by the snow which almost obscured them. "Let's not quarrel, Malcolm," she said. "We've been friends. I hope we can stay that way."

"I hope so." His tone was flat. "I'm fond of your parents. I wouldn't want to lose touch with them." He hesitated, then asked sharply, "What does Mom think about this?"

"She understands."

"Of course she understands. She understands everything and everybody. But that isn't what I asked. I want to know what she thinks of it."

"She thinks," responded Althea slowly, "that I am being heartless and sensible."

"And the Professor?"

"He's delighted. Naturally."

"Naturally." Malcolm echoed the word, giving it a sardonic inflection. "He will have a wealthy son-in-law."

"You have no right—"

"Pardon me, my dear; I have every right. And I admire your father. He looks life straight in the face: he sees everything in black and white. He's practical. He's a thoroughly admirable person."

She controlled herself with an effort, not daring to speak the words that came to her lips. And after a while, he spoke again.

"Where will you live? Here?"

"No. Logan is negotiating for the house next door. Until he has returned it, we'll live at the International."

"And then you'll move in next door to this house. The wealthy daughter of a poor but honest couple. You'll be able to do a great deal for them. That should be a source of great satisfaction to you."

"You're being horrid."

"Am I supposed to sing with glee? Of course, at the wedding party—there will be a party, won't there?"

"Yes." Her eyes took on a pleading light. "Promise me you won't make a scene, Malcolm."

"I promise." He put his hand over his heart and bowed, a mocking gesture. "We who were reared on Big Cypress plantation are at all times gentlemen, Althea. Southern gentlemen, I'd have you know. Slaves of tradition. You may count on me to behave with circumspection—then."

For the first time since meeting Malcolm, she failed to understand him. He was overdoing something, though just what it was

—or why—she didn't know. She understood the bitterness he felt, the anger, the disappointment. But this sardonic mood . . .

"A gentleman," he repeated, "then. But for now . . ."

He stepped close to her. His arms went about her, pulling her tight against him with an almost brutal strength that hurt, yet somehow thrilled her. He forced her head back and waited until she had ceased to struggle.

He looked down at her. She was passive now, yet trembling. Her lips were parted. She waited for his kiss . . . waited eagerly, welcoming it, feeling vaguely that there would be time enough to resent it after it had happened.

He released her suddenly, so suddenly that she staggered and might have fallen had she not caught the edge of the marble-topped table. She looked into a face that was Malcolm's but that somehow was different, a face that was cold and hard.

"Thank you," he said mockingly. "Thank you very much for your acquiescence. As for the kiss, I'll take delivery at some future date."

XXXI

TWO HOURS AFTER Miss Althea Carmichael became Mrs. Logan Berkeley, Malcolm embarked upon the project of becoming thoroughly drunk.

He was, he felt, entitled to it. All through the wedding ceremony, and during the lavish party which followed, he had behaved admirably. He hadn't trusted himself to kiss the bride, and he hadn't acted as best man, but he did approach the couple after the ceremony, tender his congratulations and shake hands, briefly and impersonally, with Logan.

He joined in the joking, the laughter, and the singing. He choked down a piece of the tremendous wedding cake, and nobody knew that it left a bitter taste in his mouth. He chatted with assumed amiability with whoever happened to be nearest, and believed that he gave no indication whatsoever of his true feelings.

Two pairs of eyes watched him, though, all through the evening: Moën's, soft and sympathetic, and Deborah Cortland's, alight with understanding and compassion.

It was quite a party, really. The Carmichael troupe was no longer a unit. Rudolph the Great had gone to Carson City, and Barbara

Hamilton had married an assistant foreman at the Yellow Jacket mine ten days previously. She had brought him with her tonight, big and clumsy in his mining clothes and heavy boots, and beaming with pride as she rendered "Beautiful Dreamer."

In addition to the wedding cake there were sandwiches, pickles, olives, fruits, assorted nuts, and cookies. There were great pots of coffee and there was a huge punch bowl filled with an innocuous concoction pleasantly flavored—but no more than that—with wine. And in the corner of the room there was a small table containing innumerable bottles of whisky. The Professor and Brian Boru O Mara presided there and made no secret of the fact that they were enjoying themselves.

Save for occasional spurts of sharp, bitter words between the Drakes, there was nothing to mar the gaiety of the evening.

Malcolm drank no whisky during the party. He circulated among the guests wearing a fixed smile, pretending a joviality which he did not feel—and which fooled no one—and when it became apparent that drinking had progressed to the point where further amenities were not required, he slipped into the hall, put on his coat and hat, and left the house. He wanted to get away. He did not wish to be present when the bridal couple started down the hill toward the suite Logan had engaged at the International. Perhaps, by not seeing it, he might avoid thinking about it.

Malcolm stepped into the street and into snow that came above his ankles, a new soft snow that overlaid the older snowfall which had been packed down tight. He realized abruptly that he had forgotten the heavy boots he customarily wore. He had donned regular shoes with his black broadcloth suit, and had made no change afterward.

He hesitated, then shook his head and plowed through the snow toward the corner. He heard or imagined he heard—the music of the three piece orchestra; piano, fiddle and banjo, which was still dispensing melody for the guests.

The biting cold had a revivifying effect on him. It brought his thoughts into sharp focus. He had never experienced such severe cold, nor encountered wind as strong, but at the moment he was grateful.

He headed instinctively for C Street, not knowing in advance that he was going to get drunk, not knowing where he was going or what he would do. He knew only that he had used up the last vestige of his restraint, that the finality of what he had just witnessed had to be absorbed, evaluated, and believed.

He moved slowly on the treacherous footing beneath the surface.

of new snow. It was good to be alone, to be free from the necessity of pretending that he hadn't been hurt, to look into the blackness of the night instead of into Althea's eyes. It was good not to see Logan Berkeley, smiling with the fatuousness of any bridegroom, and to feel that you'd like to kill him for this final thing he had done to you.

Malcolm had thought all these things out in advance, but somehow everything seemed more real now. The marriage of Althea and Logan was no longer something which was going to happen. It had happened. It had happened tonight, less than two hours ago. It was definite and final. It marked an end to dreams and hopes, it marked a new beginning for Malcolm Douglas.

Malcolm reached C Street. He made his way into the Crystal bar and seated himself at a vacant table against the wall. The place was crowded. It seemed suffocatingly hot by comparison with the outdoors. Malcolm shed his coat and hat and dropped them on a chair next to him. He ordered a bottle of whisky, and the waiter brought it. He left the bottle and a little glass on the table, glanced at Malcolm oddly, and walked off, shrugging.

The first huge drink went through him like fire, bringing a quick and unnatural stimulation. He looked up at the two tremendous crystal chandeliers from which the bar took its name, and glanced at the intent groups about the faro, monte, and poker tables. He absorbed the aroma of stale whisky, stale cigar smoke, and stale sweat. He took another drink, then stared as fixedly at the empty whisky glass as a soothsayer would gaze into a crystal ball.

He tossed off another drink, and his thoughts probed into the future. In those few moments he had seen more clearly than ever before, and he had mentally smashed the false gods he had been taught to worship.

Honor? A word for weaklings. Integrity? An encumbrance. Ethics? Pap for babies.

Achievement! That was the law of the Comstock. Go after what you wanted; get it, and to hell with methods. If you were hurt, take the hurt without wincing. If you hurt others, let them do their own suffering. This was no place for consideration or sensitiveness.

Be smart. Be shrewd. Be unscrupulous. Be merciless. That was what paid off here. You had to have patience and you had to have luck, but if you watched and waited and studied and absorbed, sooner or later things would come your way.

He was staying in Virginia City. He'd find work somewhere, any sort of work. He'd continue to live in the mansion as long as they'd permit him to do so. Mom and the Professor intended to stay, for

O'Mara enjoyed having them. Manny Hirsch would be there and so would the Drakes and the Kramers . . . for a while, anyway.

Next door Althea and Logan would be living. So much the better. He'd learn to meet them daily, to watch their lives together, to keep his own emotions under control. He'd know what was happening; he'd watch for any opportunity that might present itself. And if his chance ever came, he'd have no scruples.

Half drunk already, he solemnly dedicated himself to Virginia City and its principles. A hard place for hard men. A place for opportunists. Fair or foul . . . it didn't matter how you fought so long as you won.

He concentrated more intently on the glass in his hand, finding it increasingly difficult to do so. The warm glow which had suffused him had grown into a great heat. The chandeliers swayed crazily. Men entered and left and walked by him like apparitions. He did not even notice the street door swing open, nor see the glances of astonishment from men at the bar, and then the shrugs, as though this new thing, although still incredible, was still commonplace.

He did not see the massive, muscular figure of Gus Dunbar as that gentleman deposited himself in a chair a few feet from his table. He looked up into the eyes of Deborah Cortland without knowing how she had gotten there, without asking himself why. He did not know—or care—that she had sought out Gus to help her find Malcolm.

He saw her through a haze: dark and vivid and pretty. Only Deborah, of all the women in Virginia City, could walk calmly into a room and seat herself at a table. Only Deborah Cortland could do anything she cared to do in that world of men and never be criticized or insulted, a person so sure of her own rightness that she could never be wrong.

Already the bartenders, the patrons, the gamblers, had lost interest in her. One or two of them waved genially, but otherwise they paid no more attention to her than they did to the elaborate chandeliers. Decorative, that's what they were. Deborah and the crystal hangings: to be admired but not molested.

She looked at the half empty bottle of whisky and then at the unnatural brightness of Malcolm's eyes. She said, "Good idea."

"Yes, ma'am, it is." Then he frowned and blinked and concentrated on her. "What's a good idea, ma'am?"

"Getting drunk."

"It's right handsome of you to say so, ma'am. It proves you are the rarest of all gems, a sensible and discerning lady."

She smiled, partly with sorrow, partly with amusement. "You did very well," she said. "I was proud of you."

"Think nothing of it, ma'am." The whisky was giving him an overwhelming dignity. "We Douglasses—South Carolina Douglasses, ma'am—we know how to hold our liquor. We're gentlemen of the old school Not the very old school, of course, but old. We are, beggin' yo' pardon, ma'am, the God damnedest finest overseers in all the world."

"And," she said smilingly, 'about to become the drunkest"

"Always the ultimate, Miss Cortland." He poured himself another drink and swallowed it in two gulps. "Thinking, Deborah, that's what I been doing. Got a new philosophy. Take all, I have decided. Give nothing. Certain qualities demanded: patience, determination. I got em. An' also in inex—" He frowned, hesitated, and began again. "Inexorability," he finished triumphantly.

She continued to smile when she wanted to cry. Her eyes saw more than the surface—that was her blessing and her curse. She looked at the man and saw the little boy. She saw lips that held a smile and eyes that were twin wells of misery. She saw doubt and bewilderment and a great gaping wound in a young man's heart.

"Get good and drunk," she advised gently. "Gus and I will take you home and put you to bed."

"Elegant thought, ma'am. Unconventional, but elegant." A sly smile twisted his lips. "Unusual, even for the Comstock. You and me and Mr. Dunbar in bed."

She smiled at the odd conceit and agreed that it would prove a trifle crowded. They debated the point quite seriously for a few minutes. It was Malcolm who settled the argument.

"Campaign called off," he stated solemnly. "Approach it logically, and what have you?" He held up his left hand in order to check his points and seemed momentarily bewildered by the number of fingers that were there. "Three in bed—that's too many an' too mush. Gus an' me in bed—that's disgustin'. You an' Gus in bed—unthinkable. An' you know why? 'Cause Gus would be shocked. You an' me in bed—twice as unthinkable. Why? 'Cause Gus would kill me an' that would be tragic. Tragic. Worse than a weddin'."

He blinked at her, refocused his eyes, and finished proudly. "*Quod erat demonstrandum*. That's Latin meaning, 'I am finished, you are finished, Gus is finished, the whole damn world is finished.'"

He poured another drink, drained it. He braced himself on the edge of the table and stood up. "Heah's to matrimony," he said gravely. Then his eyes blazed, his body swayed, and he crashed to the floor.

Men turned from the bar and the gambling and looked in their direction. They did not seem surprised to observe that Miss Cort-

land had things under control. She was as calm and unruffled as though making a purchase in a drygoods store.

"Pick him up, Gus," she said. "We've got to carry him home."

The mammoth Mr. Dunbar tossed Malcolm over his shoulder like a sack of grain. Followed by Deborah Cortland, he started up Taylor Street, unimpressed by his burden, moving steadily through the heavy snow, indifferent to the gale which howled gleefully around the mountain.

The front door of the mansion was unlocked, as usual. Deborah led the way inside, then up to the second floor. She tapped lightly on the door of the corner room, and Mom appeared, clad in a warm woolen wrapper. She glimpsed the trio in the hall, smiled understandingly, and led the way to the room which had formerly been occupied by Barbara Hamilton, who was now elsewhere, and Althea, who had just gone.

They dumped the inert figure of Malcolm on the bed, removed his shoes and outer garments, left Gus Dunbar to complete the undressing process and put Malcolm under the covers, and then returned to the room.

Mom made a quick tour, satisfying herself that no trace of Althea would be in the room to greet Malcolm when he awakened the following day. Then she led the way downstairs and seated herself in the parlor with Gus and Deborah. "Poor boy," she said.

"Good for him," stated Deborah. "Tomorrow morning he'll feel so awful that he'll forget why he got that way."

Mom looked at Deborah, then thought of Malcolm. She was a wise and discerning person, was Mom. She said: "That room we put Malcolm in, Deborah . . . that's going to be vacant. How would you like to move in when your week is up in the place you're staying?"

Deborah looked steadily at the older woman. Then she rose suddenly, crossed the room, and kissed Mom on the cheek.

"I'd love to," she said. "And I love you for thinking of it."

XXXII

THOUGH THE PLANT of the Virginia City *Enterprise* on the east side of C Street was not spacious, it was a beehive of activity.

Malcolm Douglas stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and found himself deafened and bewildered. It sounded like a machine

shop and a madhouse all in one. Everybody appeared to be busy, but there seemed to be no pattern or purpose to their activity.

Reporters yelled through the din; compositors howled jocularities at each other as their fingers dipped deftly into the type cases; make-up men wrestled with the page forms which lay on stone slabs like bodies in a morgue; men in shirtsleeves hunched over desks, elbow to elbow, and wrote madly. From the basement came the roar of the presses. Crowded, intimate, and slightly insane, it was a miniature of the great newspaper plants of New York and Boston and Philadelphia, its bedlam more concentrated, its air more foul with rancid cigar smoke, its cuspidors more generally out of range. It was a daily morning paper and was considered the best in the Far West.

Standing just inside the front door, regarding the confusion, Malcolm almost changed his mind. This was strange to him, bewildering. He turned and might have left had not a tall, angular figure detached itself from a desk and approached through a cloud of smoke. A thin, delicate hand was extended, and Dan De Quille said heartily, "Douglas! Welcome!"

Malcolm gestured at the men scurrying about, the frenzied disorder. Then he grinned into the kindly eyes of the veteran reporter. "Is it always like this?" he asked.

"Worse. Come in some night when we're going to press. It'll drive you crazy." De Quille led the way to a long pine table at which two other men were working. He pulled up a chair for Malcolm and reseated himself in his own chair. The other two men continued scratching madly on yellow paper without looking up at their visitors.

De Quille waited patiently, his mild eyes showing slight amusement at Malcolm's bewilderment. He stroked his sparse black beard and let his hands remain motionless in his lap. Looking at him, you got the idea that he possessed a chronic and perpetual calm.

Malcolm leaned forward and shouted, feeling that otherwise he wouldn't be heard. "Someone told me one of your reporters quit."

Dan nodded. "Yes. Gone to San Francisco. They always want men with Comstock experience. Nothing as important as mining news."

"I came in . . ." Malcolm paused, startled by his own effrontery. "I thought maybe—"

"You want a job as a reporter?"

"Well, yes. Except—"

"Any newspaper experience?"

"No."

"You're educated, though. Not too much, and that's good. Got no room for erudition here. Just hard common sense."

"I'd have to learn the ABC's of newspaper work."

"Easy, here. We make our own rules. Do what we want. Get out a good newspaper, too. Hard work. Fun, though." His speech was staccato and carried above the noise. "Let's ask Joe."

He got up and moved toward a battered old roll-top desk near the window. Malcolm felt as though he were being convoyed by a scarecrow.

Joe proved to be the man at the desk: a compact person with steady eyes and a square jaw. His last name was Goodman and he was co-owner, with Dennis McCarthy, of this four-page, nine-column newspaper which was reported to yield a profit of a thousand dollars a day. That's what people said, and it suddenly occurred to Malcolm that that figure must be a standard of big success for small things. Unless the venture was something big, like a major mine or a huge pan mill or a tunnel or a railroad or a lavish saloon, it was always described as making a thousand dollars a day. Never more, never less. The thought amused Malcolm, and he was smiling as he shook hands with the genial owner and editor.

Dan De Quille wasted no words. There was nothing wasted in this office: words or time or energy. He said, "You know Malcolm Douglas. . . ." It was only half a question.

"Sure. Knife thrower. Show closed."

"He's read books. Writes real good English, I think. No experience. Wants a job."

"Staying here long?" inquired Goodman.

Malcolm said Yes.

"Forty a week satisfy you?"

"Yes."

"Newspaper experience?"

"No."

"You're hired. Let's go get a drink."

They shoved through the front door. Joe Goodman, Dan De Quille and Malcolm. They barged into the nearest saloon, stationed themselves at the end of the bar, and ordered: whisky for Dan and Joe, mineral water for Malcolm.

"You don't drink?" asked Dan.

"I don't think I'll ever touch it again," Malcolm grimaced. "I got loaded the other night. My stomach and my conscience have bothered me ever since."

"You'll recover. You better. The water around here ain't too good."

Goodman regarded his new reporter calmly. "You read the *Enterprise*?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know everything we know. We're strictly local. Com-

stockians aren't interested in anything beyond Virginia City and Gold Hill . . . with the possible exception of stock quotations from San Francisco. But they're interested in everything that happens here—everything. Especially what goes on in the mines. You know much about mines?"

"Nothing."

"Neither does anyone else, except maybe Dan, here. He's an expert. Just crazy enough to be. You'll learn, of course."

"I'll learn."

"We want facts, or rumors of what might become facts. When you want to write lies, you do it, but you tell me. We print those on page three. On page three you can write anything you want—under your name. That means it's your responsibility. If somebody gets mad at what you write, they get mad at you—not at the *Enterprise*. You got to back it up. Do you carry a pistol?"

Malcolm shook his head. "I know how to use one, of course. But these . . ." He opened his coat and showed two sharp pointed knives encased in leather sheaths and tucked under his belt. "They're usually enough."

Goodman grinned delightedly. "Something new. They'll probably treat you with special respect. You have a reputation around this town, young man. You may go far in the journalistic profession. Now then, as I say, page three belongs to the staff. If you're sore at somebody, you use that page. We perpetrate hoaxes. We dedicate that page to feuds and humor, sometimes a combination of both. Dan will explain it to you. If you go too far with the wrong man, the *Enterprise* will not pay your funeral expenses. Rest of the paper is serious."

"On the other pages we want everything from church sociables to reports of bonanzas. You'll find yourself covering mine disasters, arrivals of famous people, hangings, fights, births, and technical stuff. Write what you want the way you want. When can you start?"

Malcolm spread his hands palms up on the bar. "Here I am," he said.

"Take him, Dan," said Joe. "He's yours for a week. Good luck, Malcolm. And keep those knives handy. Some folks haven't got much sense of humor, and they insult *ex y*."

They went back to the office. Joe Goodman plunged into the stuff he had been writing. He took Malcolm as much for granted as though he'd been working there for a year. It had all been so simple, so direct, so without waste effort, that Malcolm was entranced. He followed De Quille around the plant, accepting introductions and grinning fatuously. Once De Quille asked him why he was smiling,

and he said, "At the thought that I'm about to become a newspaper man"

"You *are* one," corrected De Quille "You were a newspaperman the instant Joe Goodman hired you That's the easy part Learning to be a good one is something different

Dan was right, of course, it *was* different, but Malcolm found it fascinating He went about it eagerly and with his whole soul Within a week he had absorbed a great deal, and he had begun to acquire the sense of superiority which marks the journalist

The Comstock was no longer impersonal, he was no longer an outsider It was Malcolm's job to learn to interpret In the mad disorder of the *Enterprise* office, the disorder of the region itself seemed to straighten out, to take shape, to make sense

He was entranced by everything he encountered, and by the feeling that he was a part of it He was human enough to enjoy the deference with which he was treated by people who sought publicity for legitimate or illegitimate reasons Dan De Quille kindly, quiet, soft-spoken, continued to act as his mentor, restraining Malcolm's too great enthusiasm, curbing his gullibility

Malcolm learned to respect De Quille profoundly Apparently the tall sid-eyed man knew everybody on the Comstock and everybody knew him He was as familiar with the latest christening as he was with the latest bonanza He was without fear, and he dispensed no favors He was engrossed in his work and it took Malcolm a long time, a very long time to learn that Dan De Quille was a lonely, solitary figure, a man whose family refused to come to him from Iowa and to whom he sent the greater part of his \$70 a week salary

Malcolm continued to live at the mansion Things were different there, in more ways than one

Deborah Cortland had moved into the room which had been occupied by Alice, and Barbara F. Milton It was a fine big corner room, and it was stacked with her personal belongings and her artist's materials pens, ink, sketch pads, pencils, crayons, palettes, oils, pigments, paper, etc. in vast

Other members of the troupe had found work, too Heinrich Kramer had taken a position as night clerk in the International Hotel, where his slight foreign accent and his natural dignity made him an asset His sister, Heide, had taken charge of the linen room and already had learned to run it efficiently Gregory Drake was employed as a sort of assistant stage manager at Piper's Opera House and his wife, Marcella, was clerking in a drygoods and notions store on C Street Manny Hirsch, no longer required to perform in blackface, had found a minor clerkship with Wells-Fargo Pop was

doing nothing except peddling his Elixir of Eternity to anyone who wished to buy it, and giving it away to those who didn't have the price. Mom devoted herself to running the house; and, little by little, built up a demand for her services as an expert seamstress.

And Althea—Mrs. Logan Berkeley—moved grandly into the elegantly furnished house next door to the O'Malley mansion. She was young, radiant, and beautiful. Her husband was a successful mine-owner, and obviously very much in love with her.

He was delighted to shower her with things she had always wanted and could never before afford. She had gowns and bonnets from Paris. She had her own turnout with two blooded horses and a coachman. She had Chinese servants. She and Logan occupied an enormous bedroom on the second floor, and she loved the magnificence of the black walnut furnishings.

She was happy. She had everything she wanted in a material way. Her husband was courtly, considerate, and attentive. He was an expert lover who was constantly amazed and delighted by her eager responsiveness.

For a while Althea forgot Malcolm and the might-have-beens. The present was too full and too real for doubt or regret or uncertainty.

But Malcolm, despite his enthusiasm for his new profession, despite his concentration on his task of learning the Comstock and its methods, despite the new warm friendship that had developed between him and Deborah Cortland—despite all that, Malcolm was never for a moment unaware that Althea lived next door and that she was the wife of the man he was teaching himself to hate.

XXXIII

ADJOINING WELLS-FARGO ON C Street was a two-story business building of red brick. The interior was bisected by a long, gloomy hallway and a flight of narrow steps which led to a second-floor hallway even more gloomy than the one on the street level. The offices were occupied by lawyers, investment brokers, legitimate and otherwise; business counselors, exclusively otherwise; promoters, employment agents, and—quite proper and dignified—a firm of architects and one of engineers.

Malcolm Douglas mounted the stairway, made his way to the pair of offices on the north side, front, and walked through a door marked MATHEW D. CLAYSON, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW. He held in his hand a card

which identified him as a reporter for the *Enterprise* as though he needed visual justification of his visit to the man who once had been the partner of Brian Boru O'Mara and who was the only person on earth whom O'Mara genuinely, enthusiastically, and wholeheartedly hated.

Mathew D. Clayton it was who had been O'Mara's partner back in the days of the first boom in the early '60's; it was he who had built the mansion for the prospective bride who—quite wisely—never became Mrs. Clayton; it was Mathew D. Clayton whose initials were intertwined over the mantel in the parlor of that mausoleum of love with those of the virginal young lady who, for all Clayton knew, was still a virgin; it was Mathew D. Clayton who had cheated his partner so shrewdly as to leave himself on the road to wealth and legally safe; it was he who shunted off on O'Mara the mansion for which he not only no longer had any use, but to which he had acquired a distinct aversion.

The office Malcolm entered was empty. A door, slightly ajar, led into an adjoining office on which the word *Private* had been inscribed. He hesitated, tapped on the door, and was bidden to enter.

The voice which summoned him was as harsh and dry and impersonal as the crackling of dead leaves in late autumn. He walked into the room and extended his card to the man who had risen from his chair behind the desk.

Even standing, Mathew D. Clayton was small. Scarcely five inches more than five feet in height, he couldn't possibly have weighed more than 125. He was, perhaps, forty years of age. He had dark brown hair which was already beginning to recede from his forehead, sharp little brown eyes which were set too close together, thin, nervous hands and narrow shoulders.

Clayton studied his visitor with cold, inscrutable eyes. He said, "Yes?"

Malcolm introduced himself, repeating the information that was printed on the card he had handed over. Clayton continued to estimate his visitor, then said, without warmth, "Have a seat."

The office was bare and unattractive: flat-topped desk, a roll-top one against the opposite wall, its pigeonholes crammed with papers; a small iron safe, a small table containing a letterpress, a bookcase filled with lawbooks and books on mining. On the wall was a framed picture of General William Tecumseh Sherman at which Malcolm glanced with no particular enthusiasm.

Malcolm said abruptly: "I came to see you for two purposes, Mr. Clayton. One is business, the other personal."

Clayton inclined his balding head. It was a gesture which, from

another man, would have been courteous; from him it seemed slightly mocking, slightly insulting.

"Which will you take up first?" he inquired in that dry, dusty voice.

"The personal." Malcolm felt an uncontrollable antagonism, plus a respect he could not quite fathom. "I have certain mining interests here—"

"I know all about them." Clayton's thin lips showed the faintest trace of a smile. "The Big Cypress, which is yours, and the Rattlesnake over in Gold Hill which you feel should be half yours."

Malcolm stiffened, unable to conceal his surprise. Clayton answered his unspoken question. "I make it my business to know everything that goes on, Mr. Douglas. And now, may I inquire why you came to see me? Specifically?"

Malcolm met the eyes of the little man levelly and with more than a trace of hostility. "Because," he said coldly, "I have heard that you are the shrewdest and most unscrupulous independent operator in Virginia City."

Again that thin smile, that flicker of amusement, as Clayton bent his head in acknowledgment. "I like your directness, Mr. Douglas. And in what unscrupulous way may I be of service?"

Malcolm had been thrown off balance. He was beginning to see below the surface of the man, to dislike and respect him. Clayton's tactics were superb. He had put Malcolm on the defensive, which was precisely where Malcolm had had no intention of being; he had also made it clear that his glacial control could not be shattered by anything Malcolm might say or do.

The younger man said. "Do you know the details of my relationship with Logan Berkeley and the Rattlesnake mine?"

"Yes."

"What are my chances of establishing my half-interest in it?"

"That depends," said Clayton quietly, "on how far you are willing to go."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, Mr. Douglas, that you have no legal claim to a share in the Rattlesnake if the facts are as I have heard them. I am wondering, therefore, since you took pains to make it clear that you were attracted by my so-called unscrupulousness, just how far you are willing to proceed along those same lines."

Malcolm waited.

"In other words, Mr. Douglas, are you willing to lie to make your point?"

Malcolm's face flushed. He half rose from his chair, but was re-

strained by an amused gesture from Mathew Clayton. "You sounded the keynote for this interview, Mr. Douglas, by speaking frankly. It was logical that I should accept that as an invitation to do the same thing."

"Go ahead, please."

Clayton's long, slender, delicate hands lay on the desk top. He tapped them gently on the scarred surface, without ever shifting his eyes or his interest from his visitor.

"If," he said in his flat cold voice, "you would be willing to testify that when you and Logan Berkeley made your original agreement in San Francisco, you agreed that whatever resulted from his trip to Virginia City, regardless of the time involved, or where the money came from after your original grubstake was exhausted—you might then go to court with a fairly valid case."

Malcolm said, "That's not the way it was."

"I didn't ask you for facts. I asked whether you would be willing to testify that way."

"I would not."

"Then," said Mathew Clayton gently, "permit me to say that you are not yet ready for me."

Malcolm felt that he should be insulted, yet he was too fair to allow himself to feel that way. After all, he had sought the interview, he had invited frankness. Yet he was still shocked by the impersonal coldness of it. Never before had he encountered unscrupulousness so naked and unashamed.

"On the Comstock," Clayton was continuing quietly, "one may not hope to prosper and at the same time retain the luxury of having scruples."

"If I have no legal redress . . ."

"Your use of the word *if* is superfluous. I've already told you that, on the facts, you have none. I have also explained how you might improve your position. My advice now is to think it over. As you absorb the spirit—shall we say the cannibalistic spirit—of the Comstock, you may alter your way of thinking. I should then be delighted to renew the discussion."

Mathew Clayton opened a humidor on his desk, selected an expensive cigar, and passed the box to Malcolm. He smiled at the young man's curt refusal, then snipped the end off his own cigar, lighted it with scrupulous care so that it burned evenly, inhaled deeply, and blew a cloud of the fragrant smoke into the room. "I presume," he said, "that we have now concluded the personal part of your visit."

"We have."

"The other?"

"I'm new to this region. As a reporter, it's necessary for me to learn by questioning men who know. You've been here since the early days. I believe you can give me some information which I might work into an interesting article for the *Enterprise*."

"About what?"

"Several things. But most importantly, William Sharon and the licking he just took on the Hale & Norcross deal."

"Have I your word of honor"—again that thin little smile flickered across Clayton's lips—"while your word of honor is still something to be depended on, that my name will not be used? that I will not be quoted?"

"You have."

Clayton seemed to relax, to begin to enjoy himself. "I am a great admirer of William Sharon," he said softly. "I admire his indefatigable futility, his indifference to anything except results. I have been likened to Sharon, as you possibly have heard. He is small physically; I am even smaller. He is wealthy; I am less wealthy. But we both have the same lack of ethics, the same practical approach to life, the same absence of ridiculous romanticism."

"I feel that I have greater ability than William Sharon. What I have achieved has been without aid. He has had the almost limitless funds of the Bank crowd behind him. That has been his strength, and it may also prove to be his weakness. It will never be my weakness because I work alone and am dependent on nobody. I am so cautious that I do not even trust myself."

"I know you didn't come here to discuss me, Mr. Douglas. I projected myself into the conversation so that you would understand that temporarily I am similar to William Sharon, and therefore in a position to explain his strength and his weakness. Shall I proceed?"

Interested—more deeply than he would have thought possible—Malcolm nodded.

"Sharon has used his power ruthlessly. I believe I used that word before. It stands repetition, because it is Sharon. He has manipulated his ventures so that if they succeed, he and his associates—but most particularly Sharon himself—will benefit. If they turn out badly, the burden will fall on the stockholders and depositors of the Bank of California."

"From the day he arrived in Virginia City, Sharon has sought the title of King of the Comstock. His coronation—the official bestowing of that title, was held some time ago. His vanity is overwhelming; it exceeds even his avarice. It is his weakness, his Achilles' tendon. Bringing myself into the picture again, I would say that I should have

no such weakness were I in Sharon's shoes. It would not matter to me whether I would be dubbed king of anything. Vainglory is a facet of Sharon's character which may yet prove his undoing. Just the other day it brought him his first major defeat. His unwarranted confidence in his own invincibility, his fatuous belief that no one would dare to oppose him, has shaken his position. I am referring, of course, to the Hale & Norcross deal."

Malcolm waited, saying nothing, afraid to interrupt the clear, logical, frightening flow of words.

"Four semiliterate Irishmen," continued Clayton, "John W. Mackay, James Graham Fair, James Clair Flood, and William Shoney O'Brien—the two first, practical Comstock miners; the latter pair, partners in a San Francisco saloon and in an obscure brokerage business—those four men were beneath the notice of the Great Sharon."

"When Sharon took over Hale & Norcross, he did it spectacularly, as befitted the King of the Comstock. As you know, the mine did not hit the expected bonanza. Assessments were levied on the stockholders. The stock itself went down to ridiculous levels."

"Jim Fair was formerly assistant superintendent of that mine. He and John Mackay decided that it would be worth acquiring and exploiting. They formed a partnership with Flood and O'Brien. They bought a controlling interest quietly and cheaply. Just yesterday we learned here in Virginia City that Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien now control Hale & Norcross. Flood was elected president at yesterday's meeting; Fair was appointed superintendent."

"Will they hit a bonanza?"

"They may. Fair and Mackay are two of the smartest practical miners here. The chances are that they know something Mr. Sharon could never learn in his office at the bank. I would not be too amazed if Hale & Norcross turned out to be a most excellent investment. In fact, if any stock were now available, I would eagerly invest in it. But the point I'm making is this: Sharon was beaten because he had a contempt for his opposition. He would not even concede that there was opposition. And now this new firm, this Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien, are powers to be reckoned with."

Malcolm sat silently watching the little man, speculating about him. The man had an observing eye, a fine brain, an ability to analyze. He refuted the fashionable belief that, in order to succeed in this wild new land, a man must be possessed of tremendous muscular power.

This Clayton, for instance: Brian Boru O'Mara could have broken him in half—literally. Malcolm knew enough about the puny little

man to know that he had trodden ruthlessly on others in his upward progress, and yet there he was, physically whole, untouched. He did not know whether what he felt for this man was dislike or admiration.

"It doesn't matter," stated Clayton abruptly.

"What doesn't?"

"Whether or not you dislike me, whether or not you understand me."

Malcolm was startled "Good God!" he exclaimed, "are you also a mind reader?"

"No." Clayton shook his head. "But I understand how certain men think under certain circumstances. It's a great help, Mr. Douglas, when one wishes to achieve success."

XXXIV

ONE THING WAS CERTAIN, reflected Malcolm as he reached now for the cigar which Clayton offered him for the second time: this man was worth knowing. He asked suddenly, "Why are you willing to waste this much time on me, Mr. Clayton?"

"I'm never too busy to talk to a newspaper reporter, Malcolm. Clayton used the first name easily and naturally, subtly marking a change in their relationship. "Who knows but what, one of these days, I might be in need of a friend in your profession."

Malcolm felt oddly complimented. It was a sensation he did not stop to analyze, but there it was. He said, "In spite of your admiration for this new firm, this Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien, Sharon is still a great power here, isn't he?"

"Naturally."

"What about this railroad he's building?"

"The Virginia & Truckee?" Clayton's eyes were alight with enthusiasm. "There's an operation which is going to startle everybody before it has ended, Malcolm. It's the sort of thing I wish I'd had the brains to conceive, and the power to put into operation. What do you know about it?"

"Not much," confessed the younger man. "I understand vaguely that Sharon and the Bank crowd own mills on the Carson River which, with their water power, can reduce ore much more cheaply than the mills up here which use expensive wood for fuel. If, then,

ore can be hauled cheaply to the mills down below, it not only can be milled at less cost, but low-grade ores might possibly be milled with profit."

Clayton sat up straight. "Bravo!" he said with spontaneous enthusiasm. "You tell me you know nothing and immediately you prove yourself wrong. Already you know more than most men here have bothered to learn. I estimated you correctly, Malcolm: your mind inquires and your brain absorbs."

"Let me elaborate the deal for you. The country hereabouts is rather rugged. The building of a railroad costs more than Sharon and his associates would care to risk. But the necessity is there. Hauling fuel to the mills here costs \$4 per ton, and during six or seven months of the year road conditions are difficult, and at times impossible. With a railroad there could be twelve months' operation per year, and ore could be hauled down to the Carson River at approximately \$2 per ton."

"It was a nice idea, even for Sharon. His mines would get their milling done cheaply. The Carson mills—which up to now have not been showing a profit—would be kept busy, the railroad would be assured of dividends by charging for the haulage of ores. But Mr. Sharon wanted others to take the risk. You probably paid little heed to the publicity campaign he conducted, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"It was genius at work. Quite subtly he convinced the people of Storey and Ormsby counties that the Virginia & Truckee Railroad was essential to their well being, prosperity and happiness. He induced them to issue a half-million dollars' worth of bonds, and the money was given to the project in return for Sharon's expressed willingness to have the railroad heavily taxed once it started operation—a promise I feel sure he will keep."

"Mines controlled by Sharon contributed \$700,000 additional, making \$1,200,000 in all. You will find that as the need for further financing arises, bond issues upon bond issues will be foisted on the public. The road will eventually be completed, and when it is I feel sure that Messrs. Sharon, Ralston and Mills will own it—individually—and no one will protest."

"Why not?"

"Because the railroad is needed. Because the public will benefit by it. And then, after the first stretch is completed—between here and Carson City—they'll eventually extend in the opposite direction to Reno, where they'll join the Central Pacific, which in turn will shortly connect with the Union Pacific at Promontory, Utah. Is that quite clear to you now, Malcolm?"

"Not entirely, Mathew." The younger man also used the first name casually, and it went unremarked but not unnoticed. "You have an encyclopedic mind. You can throw facts faster than I can absorb them. But the picture is clearer than it was."

Clayton's voice, dry as dust and as emotionless, came across the room.

"You still living in Brian O'Mara's mansion?"

"Yes."

"If I may suggest: It might be indiscreet of you to tell him that you called on me."

"I wouldn't think of mentioning it," answered Malcolm. "And if O'Mara happened to hear that I'd been with you I'd say I was sent by the *Enterprise*."

Clayton's thin, ascetic face lighted with a genuine smile.

"Good," he said. "You've made progress, Malcolm. Just in the little while since you entered this office, you've gone ahead."

XXXV

THE DINING ROOM of Logan Berkeley's home was small but elegant. It was paneled in oak, and the heavy carpeting and draperies were a dark wine color. The table, chairs, sideboard, and china cabinet were of black walnut, the design massive and handsomely carved.

The crystal chandelier was unlighted, and the room was illumined by two kerosene lamps with chaste formal shades. A soft-footed, inscrutable Chinese boy removed the dessert and brought coffee in tiny, delicate cups.

Logan gazed fondly down the length of the table. Althea looked young and beautiful and happy. She was wearing a square-cut dinner gown which displayed the curve of her breasts and the beginning of the shadowed cleft between them. Logan said, "You love this, don't you, darling?"

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "I love it, Logan. It's all so new. It's all so much the sort of thing I never thought I'd be lucky enough to get." A mischievous light flashed in her eyes. "And I love the man who makes it all possible."

He laughed delightedly. "You're the woman, of all the ages," he applauded. "You know how to keep a man happy: flatter him, build up his ego, take nothing for granted. . . . Follow that course, al-

ways, my dear, and you'll never need to worry about another woman."

She said, "And you like it, too, don't you, Logan?"

"Yes. But my reason is different from yours. You love it because it's new. I love it because it brings back a gracious way of life I never thought to see again."

They finished their coffee. She waited while he came to her end of the table, pulling back her chair. As she rose, he dropped his lips briefly to the bare flesh below her throat. They went into the parlor where she went to a cabinet in the corner, returning with cards and a cribbage board. He smiled tolerantly and got up to arrange a little mahogany table and two delicate chairs. They seated themselves opposite each other, their knees touching, and began to play.

"The usual stakes?" he asked, looking deep into her eyes.

She said teasingly, "You collect them whether or not you win."

"Would you have me less amorous?"

She said, daringly: "You know I wouldn't, Logan Berkeley. I love—that is—well . . ."

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Always a perfect lady in the parlor, aren't you? Whereas upstairs . . ."

"I declare, Logan," she said, flustered. "You do tease me so. You know I get embarrassed when we even think of such things downstairs."

"But the fact remains that you *do* think of them, don't you?"

"Of course I do." She was always honest, never evasive. "How can a girl help it when she's married to a handsome husband?"

He swept the cards and the cribbage board to the floor. "The time has come," he said severely, "to put an end to all this conversation. Are you coming with me or do I carry you upstairs?"

There was a fireplace in their bedroom. Logan made an elaborate ceremony of stirring up the smoldering blaze and of adding additional logs. The flames roared and crackled, casting dancing shadows on the walls. He blew out the lamp, so that the only light in the room came from the fire. •

She went into the little dressing alcove, and he undressed slowly, relishing the warmth of the fire against his skin. He put on a dressing gown and seated himself in a big comfortable chair in front of the flames.

A few moments later Althea joined him. She was wearing a pale lavender satin wrapper trimmed with delicate white lace. She had let her blond hair down so that it cascaded over her perfectly formed face. This was something she knew he liked, and which he was often too shy to request. •

"Come here!" he commanded.

Demurely she obeyed. He reached out and pulled her down on his lap. "You shameless hussy," he laughed. "You've nothing on under that."

"Would you prefer—" He smothered her question with kisses, holding her close, letting his hands wander. She shivered—though not with cold—and pressed her lips tight against his, frankly seeking, frankly exciting him. After a while he pushed her off his lap so that she was standing between him and the fire. He rose, untied the bow in the front of the satin wrapper, and made an effort to pull it away. She smiled mistily and shrugged out of it herself, so that she stood revealed in delectable nudity.

There was a superb effrontery in what she did. She stood in the firelight, enjoying his excitement, his appreciation of her youthful beauty. He said huskily, "Haven't you any modesty, Althea?"

"Why you?" she countered. "Why, no, I haven't."

Though he loved her directness, he could never quite accustom himself to it. "In all this light—" he said, as though arguing with the concepts of modesty he'd been taught.

"You're a silly goose," she said gaily. "Is there something wrong in what we do, Logan, that it must always be in darkness? Why must we hide from each other? Do you like to look at me or don't you?"

"You know I do."

"Then look." She stood daringly, defying him to be shocked, defying him not to be. "I belong to you. Why should I deny you any of the pleasure I can bring?" Her eyes were bright. "I declare," she said, "you really *are* embarrassed."

"You're the one who's supposed to be."

"But I'm not. Not at all. I like my God. I'm glad that I'm attractive. I want you to enjoy looking at me. And I think it would be hypocritical to pretend I didn't like it."

He moved close to her, put his arms about her. Her bare flesh was hot under his palms, and he strained her to him hungrily. "Could any man ever tire of you, I wonder?" he said between kisses.

"Could you?"

By way of answer, he picked her up in his powerful arms and carried her to the bed. He threw off the robe he was wearing and lay down beside her. His arms went out hungrily, but there was no need to seek, because she was already there, with an unashamed eagerness that matched his own.

Later, when the flames were less fierce, and when they lay close together under the covers, contented, relaxed, and yet still wide awake, their arms about each other, but without passion, he stretched

his long limbs and smiled. "You're wild," he said. "You're magnificent. I love you."

"And I love you," she purred, "even your terrible modesty."

They separated by just a few inches, and lay on their backs, gazing contentedly at the ceiling. It was in these periods of utter exhaustion which followed the frenzy of love making that they felt closest.

He said, "How's your friend Malcolm getting on with his newspaper work?"

The question was casual, without significance or hidden meaning. She said: "All right, I suppose. He doesn't discuss things with me."

"Or, with me." A slight frown appeared on Logan's forehead. "Something's happening to him. He's becoming hard as nails. And he's trying his best to hate me. I'm sorry for him. I wish things could be different between us."

Althea said, "They've always been different, haven't they, Logan?" "What does that mean?"

"Well, didn't he always feel like a sort of servant—back in South Carolina? Wasn't he treated as an inferior?"

"Good God, no! He was as much at home in our house as he was in his own. We four boys had the same tutor. We respected and admired his father, and we regarded Malcolm as a brother."

She said tensely, "When you both got older—when your friends visited at Big Cypress—was Malcolm included?"

Logan Berkeley drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "That," he said, "was something that I doubt if I could ever make you understand. No, Malcolm wasn't included. I suppose he got the idea that we were snobbish. We weren't. We were saving him from embarrassment. We'd have been delighted to let him mingle with our friends. He was just as much of a gentleman as any of us, perhaps a better one. But sooner or later the word would have got around that he was the son of our overseer."

"And would that have been so bad?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"I told you it couldn't be explained. Maybe you'll ask whether our friends would have been rude to him. Of course they wouldn't. They'd have gone out of their way to be courteous. With the best intentions in the world, they'd have rubbed salt in the wound that shouldn't have been a wound in the first place. It was one of those social things that couldn't be changed, not in the era in which we used to live. He was deeply hurt by being excluded from certain things; he'd have been even more deeply hurt by joining us."

She said, practically, "It doesn't make sense!"

"I didn't expect it to. You'll just have to take my word that that's the way it was. But," and he made a helpless gesture in the semi-darkness, "why should he continue to carry a chip on his shoulder? Why should he resent me now? Is it because I have more than he has?"

She said softly: "You've always had things, Logan. Maybe you don't understand how it feels to want, and not to have."

Logan said, after a long silence, "You were very fond of Malcolm once, weren't you, Althea?"

"Very." Her answer was calm, matter-of-fact. "I still am. But when I was fond of him then, he was happy. Now he's unhappy."

"He shouldn't be. He seems to like this new work of his. He's got lots of friends." He grinned suddenly. "You know what we ought to do, honey? We ought to promote this romance between him and Deborah Cortland."

"Deborah?" She drew away from her husband. "My goodness, Logan, now I *know* you're crazy."

"She's attractive," he persisted, "and intelligent. They're friends. They're both lonely. Why couldn't it be?"

It was a new idea to her, and a startling one. She had never thought of Malcolm in connection with any other woman. Not that way, not as a husband. The thought brought an odd little ache, a feeling of possessiveness which she didn't bother to analyze.

"She—she's different," Althea said weakly. "She's a lady, and yet she's not a lady. She . . ."

That amused him. He said, "And listen to who's talking."

"Logan! You know I'm a lady!"

"I know you're not, darling—and I love you for it. Oh, you may act like one sometimes. Maybe almost all the time. But basically you're not."

"That's a horrid thing to say."

"It's a compliment," he corrected. "I'm sick and tired of ladies, of bloodless, uninteresting creatures who always say what they're expected to say in the way they're supposed to say it; who go through life with false words and false modesty; who would never admit, even to themselves, that they'd like to do certain things. Don't ever be a lady, Althea—not that kind of lady. It would be unworthy of you. As a matter of fact," he finished ruminatively, "you and Deborah Cortland are much more alike than you know."

"And why are you so interested in her, Mr. Berkeley?"

"Because she's an interesting person. She thinks and acts and talks like a man. She has the courage of a man. But don't ever delude

yourself, my dear: she's very much of a woman. Furthermore, I believe she's in love with Malcolm Douglas."

Althea looked away. She didn't want Logan to see her eyes just then because Logan knew her, too, and he might notice something that she didn't want anybody to see.

She sighed and tried to dismiss Malcolm from her thoughts. She wished the subject hadn't come up; she wished she could stop remembering things that were better forgotten.

He reached over and touched her thigh. "Happy?" he asked gently.

"Oh, Logan!" she said, "you don't know how much."

"Love me?"

"I adore you."

"If I were poor—" He asked the question casually, without hidden meaning, without subtlety, a purely rhetorical query because the need for conversation was still on him. "If I were poor, would you still love me?"

"I'd love you twice as much," she said. "A thousand times as much."

It was an absurd answer. She knew it was absurd the moment she said it. But it was the obvious answer, too, the answer that would be given by any dutiful bride.

Drowsiness crept upon them. She turned on her side so that her body fitted into Logan's, and his strong arms wrapped about her affectionately and protectively. And after a while he slept.

But she did not sleep. Words scurried through her brain, words which implied possibilities—possibilities which she refused to concede or to think through to a logical conclusion.

If Logan were poor . . . If Malcolm were rich . . . But it wasn't that way; it never could be. She was an idiot to think that way.

But a new thought persisted. Malcolm was remaining in Virginia City. When she saw him—not infrequently—at the O'Mara place next door, she observed a new light in his eyes, the hard, determined set to his jaw. His conversation was occasionally bitter. He was—well, she didn't know how to put it at first, and then the answer came to her: Malcolm was beginning to fit into the Comstock, to belong, to be an insider.

And that, she reflected, not knowing why it disturbed her, was something Logan Berkeley could never be.

XXXVI

IT WAS A NIGHTLY RITUAL, once the *Enterprise* had been put to bed. Dan De Quille, Joe Goodman, and Malcolm Douglas would walk across the street to their favorite saloon, settle themselves at their favorite table, order drinks, and discuss the past, present, and future of the Comstock. Sometimes they were alone, but occasionally they were joined by other members of the staff or by two or three of the "boys" from the *Gold Hill News*, that formidable journalistic rival from the other side of the Divide.

Malcolm never did much of the talking, but he was a magnificent listener. He did not pretend to knowledge he did not possess; he never hesitated to ask questions; he was not content, even, to relinquish a topic until he understood all they could tell about it.

Tonight, after two drinks, he said good night to his friends and hunched his shoulders against the inevitable young gale as he stepped into the street and turned toward home. The drinks he'd taken gave him a warm inward glow, but even so, he reflected, as he trudged up the steep acclivity of Taylor Street, it was brutal weather.

April 3rd. Spring officially had been in existence for thirteen days, but you had to consult a calendar to be sure, and then you couldn't quite believe it. Malcolm had become as accustomed to the climate as he ever would become, but he didn't like it and never would.

A single kerosene lamp burned in the hallway of the O'Mara mansion. He tiptoed upstairs and went to his room. He entered softly, not wishing to disturb Manny Hirsch, but he needn't have bothered. The lamp was lighted, and he saw the thin, spare figure of Manny at the window. Manny's hands were clasped behind his back so tightly that the knuckles were white.

Malcolm frowned, wondering why he was disturbed. He said "You're up late, Manny. What's the matter?"

The little man turned slowly. He was only twenty-nine years of age, but he looked forty. His thin face was lined, his eyes troubled. Under any circumstances Emmanuel Hirsch was melancholy in appearance; his very sadness of expression had turned out to be a theatrical asset in that it gave an added touch of hilarity to his comedy when he was performing. But now there was nothing comic

about him. The thing that was on his face was tragedy, and his attenuated figure, his narrow shoulders and chest, his spindly legs, lent dignity to that tragedy as though it assumed greater stature for itself by being compressed into so small, so pitiful a body.

Manny said unsteadily, "I'm glad you're here, Malcolm."

"You're not sick, are you?"

"No." The prematurely seamed face twisted. "Not the way you mean." He stared intently at Malcolm, his black eyes too black, too bright, "God damn it!" he said suddenly.

Malcolm spoke gently, asked what was the matter.

"As you came down the hall just now, Malcolm, did you hear anything?"

"No. What sort of thing?"

"Open the door. Listen carefully."

More than slightly disturbed, Malcolm did as bidden. He stood half in his room, half in the hallway. At first he heard nothing. Then it came to him, softly, terribly. It was the sound of a woman's sobbing. The crying was deep and racking, as though the person was making a supreme but futile effort to control it.

It came from the room directly across the hall, the room occupied by Gregory and Marcella Drake. Malcolm closed the door softly and walked back into his own room. He dropped into one chair and motioned Manny into the other.

"Relax," he ordered. "Tell me about it."

Manny seated himself, but he did not, could not, relax.

"That son of a bitch!" he said. "That Drake. He's been beating her."

Malcolm waited, saying nothing.

"He waits until he knows I'm in my room. Then he beats her."

"Why?"

"Because he thinks we're in love with each other."

"Are you?"

Manny's eyes were pleading for understanding. He said, "Yes. Yes, we are. But damn it, Malcolm, this is something we couldn't help! It doesn't justify what he does! I hear him shouting at her, calling her a whore—"

Malcolm asked calmly, "How far has it gone, Manny?"

The little man's eyes opened wide. "Nothing like that, Malcolm; I swear it. Though God knows he's tried to force us into it by making her hate him and fear him, by refusing to divorce her so she can marry me. . . ."

"Then he knows positively that you are in love with each other, is that it?"

"Of course he knows. Everybody knows. You know it. I've talked to Mom about it. I talked to her when she got tired of their quarreling and wanted to put them out of the house. I begged her not to. I said it would be worse on Marcella if she did that. They're not earning much money. They couldn't live comfortably. Drake would blame Marcella for everything." There were tears in his eyes, helpless, angry tears. "Tonight I meant to kill him. I took that poker from the fireplace and started across the hall. Mom stopped me."

Malcolm said, "It's no good losing your head."

"He's got to stop what he's doing. He's got a streak of terrible cruelty in him. He does these things when he knows I'm in my room. I stay out a lot; I walk the streets so he will know I'm not home—so he'll let her alone. But he waits—Marcella has told me that he waits—until I come in. Then it starts. I can't stand it. She can't stand it, either."

Malcolm kept his voice low, quiet, soothing. "There are some things we have to take, Manny, things we can't do anything about. I know." He was silent for a long time. Then he said, "I know this won't be helpful, Manny, but the only answer I see is for you to grope. For her sake. You'll be giving up your comfort so that she can keep hers. It might smooth things for her."

The other man nodded gratefully. "You're right, of course." He closed his lips tightly. When he opened them it was to curse, steadily, bitterly, hopelessly. Malcolm had heard that kind of cursing from soldiers caught in a hopeless position, being raked with artillery which they were helpless to answer, when they were under orders not to move, when there was nothing they could do but remain where they were, with death raining all about them, watching their friends being blown to bits, knowing that the next shell might be for them. He'd heard men cursing then—just as Manny Hirsch was cursing now—and there was nothing profane or irreverent in their cursing. They cursed because it was the only outlet left to them, because there was nothing else they could do.

Manny said: "I've never been in love before. No woman has ever been in love with me. I'd rather be dead than to have things this way."

Malcolm remained silent.

"Gregory Drake hates me. That's funny, isn't it? He hates me because I'm in love with his wife. Not because we've done anything wrong, but just because I love her and she loves me. He uses me as an excuse to quarrel with her, to beat her. . . ."

"I'd watch that, Manny. He might want you to attack him. He might take advantage of that to kill you."

The smaller man's voice was unutterably weary "I wouldn't mind being killed if it would do her any good."

"Yes, you would. And there's no need making any such silly gesture. Get out of this house. Move away. Stay in the Comstock if you want, but find yourself another room. You'll hate it. You'll be uncomfortable and miserable. But you won't hate it as much as you hate what's going on here."

"I'll move out of here," Manny said "But I wish you'd promise me something."

"What?"

"Watch out for her. If you hear these awful things I've been hearing, try to stop them. Any decent man has the right to protect a woman."

"I promise"

"And tell me what's happening, will you, Malcolm? If you can tell me honestly that things change for the better after I've moved, I'll be happy. I'll know that I've done some good for her." He looked straight into Malcolm's eyes. "I know you'll do it," he said. "But I wish you'd been in love with a woman, having her close to you, wanting her and knowing you were helpless to do anything about it. Then you'd really understand."

Malcolm did not answer immediately. When he did, his voice was steady.

"I know how you feel, Manny," he said. "Take my word for it. I know exactly how you feel."

XXXVII

IT CAME FIRST as a thin pencil of sound that pierced the curtain of his sleep. It was the shrill wailing of a mine whistle, but it did not stop. It was steady, insistent, and very soon the whistles of other mines joined in so that the air vibrated as though all the treble notes on an organ had been weighted down to maintain a continuous crying.

It was eight o'clock on Wednesday morning, April 7, 1869. Malcolm Douglas tossed restlessly and burrowed under the blankets. But even there he was reached by the mournful, continuous wailing of all the mine whistles from the southernmost tip of Gold Hill, to the north end of the Lode which was just beyond the limits of Virginia City.

It grew and grew and grew; it beat on his eardrums even before it reached his consciousness. He was accustomed to the plaintive blasts of mine whistles, but not so many, not so insistent. They became a physical force which pried his eyes open and caused him to sit up in bed, heavy-eyed and frowning.

Some of the whistles—far off toward Gold Hill—changed their cadence. They came now in short, sharp blasts, like a person calling "Help! Help! Help!"

Malcolm was awake now. He dressed swiftly, reaching for his heavier garments. wool hose, miner's boots, denim trousers, wool shirt. He ran downstairs. Mom was in the hallway carrying a tray on which there was steaming coffee and some biscuits and butter. "Eat some breakfast," she ordered, putting the tray in his hands. "I was on my way upstairs to wake you."

He carried the tray into the parlor, grateful for the scalding coffee. Deborah Cortland was there, standing at the window, straining her eyes southward. They heard heavy boots thumping in from the other side of the ground floor, and Brian Boru O'Mara, eyes red from a night of hard drinking, stamped into the parlor.

"Accident," he announced. "Bad accident. Whistles keep going like that, then change over to the short blasts, it means important trouble."

Mom brought him coffee, and he thanked her with his eyes as he gulped at it.

Deborah said, from the window "I see smoke. Clouds of it."

"Where?"

"Beyond the Divide."

"Holy Mother of God," exclaimed O'Mara. "That would be meaning the worst that could happen. Fire underground."

Deborah disappeared and returned within three minutes. She had donned heavy boots, a heavy coat, and had thrown a woolen scarf across her shoulders. She was carrying a portfolio which Malcolm knew contained sketch pads, pencils, crayons. She said, "Who's going?"

Before they reached the front door, it flew open and Althea entered. She had come from next door wearing only a nightgown and wrapper, over which she had thrown a winter coat. Her eyes were wide and frightened. She said breathlessly "Foggy just sent a messenger to the house. He says there's a terrible fire in the Gold Hill mines; the Yellow Jacket, Kentuck, Crown Point and"—Althea's eyes were filled with prophetic fear—"and the Rattlesnake."

O'Mara shoved his giant frame through the door, followed by Malcolm and Deborah. They started down the street toward C, and

even before they reached that main artery they saw that things were not as usual.

Everybody was looking south, hurrying south. There was a oneness of purpose, a unanimity of interest that Malcolm had never before seen. They hurried down the hill and turned right on C street toward the Divide a half-mile away, toward Gold Hill, just beyond the Divide.

Deborah kept pace with them, walking with the easy, free-hipped stride of a man, taking two steps to their one. She said to O'Mara; "I'm ignorant. I know fire is terrible. But why is it so much worse in a mine? What is there to burn?"

"Timber," answered O'Mara. "Pine timber: resinous. All the good pine from all the land hereabouts—from clear beyond Tahoe in the Sierras. 'Tis me that's thinking there's more timber in these mines than in any in the world. Lumber to prevent cave-ins, big square sets in the huge chambers the miners create when they hit ore pockets. Twenty, thirty feet high sometimes. Fifty, hundred feet in length. All timbered. All pine. All resin. Good God! Look at that!"

A pillar of smoke billowed up over the Divide, and was followed by another and another. O'Mara crossed himself and murmured a prayer.

"'Tis a bad one," he said, "and there'll be no stopping it."

"Why not?" asked Malcolm.

"Because human life is too cheap on the Comstock, me boy. It always has been and 'twill always be. No proper ventilation in those mines, even in the best of 'em. No proper water."

They were progressing more slowly now, because they were part of a human stream which converged from all sides: miners, grim-faced and cursing; women with staring eyes and tight lips; hurrying . . . hurrying . . . hurrying. . . Close, closer to the Divide. Up the Divide. And there they paused, caught by the horror of what they saw and with even greater horror of what they could not see.

Smoke rose from the shafts of all four burning mines, but it came in greater quantities from the Kentucky and the Crown Point. It filled the air and brought with it the sharp, pungent odor of gases generated by the burning wood and heated ores underground. There was the additional smell of sulphur so that when you got closer and were assailed by it your eyes smarted and you felt that you could not breathe.

It seemed that every man, woman, child, and stray dog in Virginia City and Gold Hill had crowded into the area or was on the way. Law-enforcement men were there, struggling futilely with the crowd which, in trying to help, was impeding the work. The fire depart-

ments of Virginia City and Gold Hill in their red shirts and great hats were battling to lay hose lines, to bring rescue equipment.

From over the throng there arose a mournful wailing of human voices with an undertone of prayer and an overtone of hysteria. Malcolm caught phrases here and there, snatches of information which bewildered him more than they helped:

"Yes . . . started at eight o'clock this morning."

"No. That's when they discovered it. Must have been burning four, five hours "

worst in the Yellow Jacket."

"Hell! It's worst everywhere. All them four mines been workin' the same east ore bodies from the 600 foot to the 900 foot levels. Stopes an' winzes all run into each other. What fire an' gas an' steam there is, it'll be through 'em all "

hundred men caught down there."

. . . two hundred "

"Somebody said less'n fifty. Night shift checked off at four o'clock. Day shifts didn't start goin' down 'til seven. They couldn't too many of 'em be down yet."

course I don't know how it started. Nobody knows."

. . . heard it was a candle left stickin' in a timber by a man on the night shift."

"You can hear anything anything

Malcolm kept moving through the crowd. He had lost O'Mara. His last glimpse of Deborah Cortland had been of her standing near a group of women, sketching. The women had not been shrieking. They had been standing motionless, staring toward the smoke and the smell and terror. Their tragedy was in their eyes.

The northernmost of the four burning mines was the tiny Rattlesnake. Malcolm shouldered his way through the crowd. He found Logan Berkeley, grimy, sweaty, tense.

"Logan!"

Berkeley turned. His face was haggard. He seemed not to recognize the man who had spoken to him, so great was his concentration on other things. Then he said, "Hello, Malcolm."

"Your mine, too?"

"Yes."

"Anything I can do?"

"Nothing anybody can do now."

"I'm here in the *Enterprise*."

"Better get over to the Yellow Jacket, then. That seems to be the worst."

Berkeley turned to three women, wives of miners who were

trapped down below. He was gentle with them, and was talking softly as Malcolm moved away.

Disaster! That was the impression Malcolm got. Major disaster. It was different from a major battle, because in warfare you could fight back or at least pretend that you were fighting back. Here you could only stand horrified and watch the smoke billow up to denote the intensity of the fire below, you could only stand in the smoke and sharp odor of flaming resin and heated ore, and know that there was nothing you could do to help the men in the stopes and galleries, the miners who had gone down before eight o'clock and who were still there.

The greatest crowd was gathered at the Yellow Jacket. There was an instinctive knowledge that it was the focal point of the disaster. Superintendent John P. Jones, a square jawed, stalwart man, a practical miner, a man of indomitable courage, was the center of a group of firemen, of volunteer rescuers, of wailing women.

The grief of the women seemed to bother him more than the destruction of the mine. Malcolm heard him raise his voice and call out, "Father! Father Manogue!"

Father Patrick Manogue of the Roman Catholic Church, St. Mary's in the Mountains, heard the call. He was a blond giant of a man, six feet four inches in height, weighing about 225 pounds, and one of the most powerful, one of the gentlest, one of the best beloved men on the Comstock. His eyes were blue and calm as he sought to do what he could with people who in this hour were closer to their God, more dependent on their God, than ever before.

"Yes, John," said Father Manogue.

"Take care of these ladies, will you, Father? Try to make them understand everything possible's being done. I'm organizing a rescue party. I'll lead it myself. We're sending cages down in the effort to reach some of the men. I've got to do my work. No one else can do it."

Father Manogue nodded and turned to the women. His rich, full voice was not raised, yet it carried over the noise and the confusion. He said, "Let us pray to our Almighty God" and when he knelt, the women knelt with him, and for a few moments they knew hope and solace.

Other clergymen, of other denominations, followed the example of Father Manogue. Since physical action seemed impossible, prayer was doubly important. And so, all about the Yellow Jacket, there were kneeling, praying groups. They did not seek their own pastors, each man and woman prayed with whoever happened to be nearest. All minor differences of theology were forgotten in the face of common suffering.

Some who were not praying crowded closer and closer to the shaft. A flame roared up suddenly, spouting into the air, scorching some, choking others with deadly fumes. Cinders gushed out of the shaft, chips of burning wood.

A half-dozen men had been climbing out of the shaft, making their way tortuously upward by means of ladders, when the lethal updraft came. They were torn from the ladders, and their bodies went down, down, down. . . .

The engineers could not see. One ran his cage into the sheaves. Another, getting a signal from below, turned on full power and brought his cage up eight hundred feet in twenty four seconds. There were men on it, and they told ghastly stories of asphyxiation, of terror, of men who had been on the rising platform with them, but who had been thrown off by the terrific speed of the ascent and had dropped back to the furnace nine hundred feet below.

Another cage rushed to the surface. The nearest emitted a chorus of agony. Three men were on the platform—three brothers, the Bichels. On the floor lay the oldest one, dead. The second was sprawled unconscious, grasping with one hand the uprights of the cage, and with the other holding tight to the torso of his youngest brother, who had been decapitated as the cage sped upward.

Jones was consulting with one of his engineers and a foreman. They decided that at the moment the main shaft, with its powerful updraft, was the most dangerous place in the mine. Jones held the cage which had brought up the Bichel brothers and scribbled a note to the men below, the men who might still be alive and conscious.

It is sure death to come up from where you are. We shall get you out soon. The gas in the shaft is terrible and produces speedy death. Write a word to us and send it up on the cage and let us know where you are.

The cage dropped, the crowd breathlessly watching the indicator 500, 600, 700, 80 feet. It stopped. The hoist engineer waited, his hand on the lever, watching for the signal to hoist. They waited. For an eternity they waited. There was no signal.

The cage came up slowly, still bearing the message and the lantern. The onlookers understood. The message of hope had been lowered when there was no reason to hope. The men were dead.

Very close to Malcolm, a woman shrieked. He turned to stare into the eyes of the girl who had been Barbara Hamilton, who had been the contralto singer of sweet songs with the Carmichael troupe, the Barbara Hamilton who only recently had married a burly assistant foreman of the Yellow Jacket mine.

She saw Malcolm and went to him. She clung to him in terror.

Malcolm held her. He was shaken because this was someone he knew; the disaster had suddenly become deeply, devastatingly personal.

He whispered words of hope. But even while doing so, he knew that there was no hope.

XXXVIII

HE TURNED BARBARA HAMILTON over to Father Manogue and walked on to the Kentuck. There he found John Mackay and Dan De Quille, the former tense but calm, the latter looking sadder than usual, and wiser. De Quille spoke to him and introduced him to Mackay.

There was grief in Mackay's eyes, aside from the grief that he felt for the human tragedy. This was the Kentuck, his Kentuck, the mine which had started him on the highroad to success. Smoke was still trailing up its shaft and helping to spread a pungent pall over the bleak landscape. But the man was quiet, controlled, watchful.

"The fire seems less intense in this shaft," Mackay said quietly. "We just sent a cage down with three volunteers. They brought back two dead bodies."

Malcolm said, "Has anyone a definite idea of how it started?"

John Mackay shook his head. "The carelessness of some miner, probably. All we know surely is that just after the day shift went down in the Yellow Jacket, a mass of charred timbers collapsed in one of the stopes, sending gas and smoke and fumes through the workings of all four of the mines." He made a helpless, sorrowful gesture. "We're doing all we can. I wish someone could help the w-women. They're the ones I'm most sorry for."

He left them, walking close--too close--to the mouth of the shaft. Men made way for him and watched him respectfully. He was a popular man, fair and fearless. His shoulders were square and his body compact. He had steady eyes and he wore a small mustache which was inclined to droop at the corners. He stood now, talking to one of the firemen, pulling at the ends of his mustache, shaking his head, a lone, powerful figure who wanted to help but could not.

Malcolm remained with Dan De Quille. The tall veteran reporter was visibly affected. He said, "I've seen lots of mine accidents, Malcolm, but never anything like this."

"When will they get it under control, Dan?"

"Who knows? It depends on what is happening underground, on how far the fire has spread. They're between the devil and the deep sea."

"It's this way," Dan explained. "All four of those mines are using some stopes in common, partly for convenience, partly for ventilation. As long as they keep those galleries open, they'll get drafts, and as long as they've got drafts, the fire will continue to spread." He sighed. "If there were no men down below, or if they knew that they were all dead, they'd seal off the galleries on the 800- and 900-foot levels where things are worst. Then they'd turn steam and water into the fire areas. But they can't—not while things are this way. It would be sentencing to death any man who happened to be alive."

"What effect will it have on the mines?"

"Nobody can answer that, either, Malcolm. Most of the walls and ceilings down below are soft; they've needed more timbering than any other mines in the world. Wherever those timbers have burned, the roofs and walls would have collapsed. My feeling is that it's bad . . . mighty bad. They might never operate again. They'll be burned and flooded. Even if they do get back into production, it'll take time and cost a fortune."

There were volunteers enough for the rescue journeys into the mines, but as the day wore on and evening came it became increasingly apparent that there was no one to rescue. Two hours after midnight thirteen bodies had been recovered, several of them from the sump at the 1,100 foot level where they had fallen from stations above, some at other levels lying as they had fallen when overcome by the poisonous gases. By one o'clock on the afternoon of the 8th, the number of recovered bodies had mounted to twenty-three. On the 900-foot level of the Crown Point, about thirty feet from the shaft, nine bodies were found huddled. It was obvious that they had disconnected an air pipe in the futile and forlorn hope of getting enough air to keep them alive.

It was not until the 10th of April that all hope was abandoned, not until then that the superintendents dared take steps which might preserve what was left of the mines but which presumed that all below were dead. At noon, amid anguished wailings from the on-lookers, the mouths of all the shafts were covered with heavy planks, wet blankets, and earth; then steam was turned into the Yellow Jacket shaft through the airpipe leading from the blower. It was forced down to the 800- and 900-foot levels, from whence it would spread through all the stopes and galleries. Gone then was the last hope. Gone were the lives of the forty three men who were known to have been below.

Superintendent Jones had gone down twice before that, heroically attempting to connect a fresh-air tube with the blower. Twice he and a companion had been driven to the surface, near to asphyxiation. Mackay volunteered to go down, and so did his partner, Jim Fair. For once Fair was a subdued man, his natural bluster forgotten. Malcolm was near the Rattlesnake when Logan Berkeley descended, and he helped resuscitate him when he was hauled back to the surface unconscious. Logan's eyes were haggard, his broad shoulders sagged. He rejected the offers of other volunteers. "There's no use," he told them. "Nothing down there can possibly be alive."

Grief had become quieter; hysteria was controlled. All that could be done to save life had been done: now efforts were directed to salvaging the mines. On the 12th a few more bodies were found, but their condition emphasized the ghastly story.

On the 14th, at three o'clock in the afternoon, steam was shut off and all activity stopped. Three days later the shafts were opened and preliminary explorations were made. The fire still burned, still spread. On May 2nd the firemen, the superintendents, and the miners realized that the fire could not be checked in its entirety; the only hope was to control some portion of it. The drifts connecting the four mines were closed and the shafts of all of them again sealed, cutting off the supply of fresh air which had helped spread the conflagration. Ruination had come to the mines which had been among the most brilliantly productive on the Lode. The caved-in stopes smoldered for months, and the workings were a shambles. Fire had ended the days in bonanza, and now assessments would be levied. Money would be poured into the wreckage in the attempt to work profitably again the rich ore bodies which were known to be there.

But Mackay's Kentuck was gone and Logan Berkeley's Rattlesnake was ruined. A new, rich ore body was to be discovered eventually in the Yellow Jacket, north of the fire line, and the Crown Point bonanza was destined to make Comstock history.

There were forty-three dead men; there were almost that many widows; there were many, many children without fathers; and there were innumerable miners thrown out of work by the stoppage of four hitherto successful mines. It was the low point in the economy of the Comstock, the nadir of discouragement, the end of the second bonanza era. Physically and spiritually the Comstock was in borrasca, and would remain that way for a long time to come, until all but the strongest men, and the weakest, had been driven out.

A few indomitable men retained their confidence. William Sharon pushed work on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad to Carson City.

the new firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien rescinded assessments which had been levied on the stockholders of Hale & Norcross when they struck the bonanza which Mackay and Fair had believed was there. But in 1869 the total production of the Comstock was only \$7,500,000, the lowest since 1861.

XXXIX

THROUGHOUT THE DAYS and nights of the Yellow Jacket fire, Malcolm Douglas was busy. He saw much and learned much. He slept when he could, which was not often. He saw human grief reach its apex, and then level off. He saw men turn their attention from personal problems to the practical tasks of restoring the burned mines to production.

For the bereaved families there was sympathy and help, but except by those families, the casualties were forgotten. The living were the important ones, the Comstock had no time to grieve indefinitely over the dead. Virginia City and Gold Hill shrugged off the past and planned for the future.

The Lode was still there, the inexhaustible, fabulous Comstock Lode. Silver in great quantities waited to be mined and milled; gold was there for the digging stocks—which had crashed following the fire—already were beginning to show a new vitality. Adolph Sutro actually started work on his tunnel. If the big men of the Comstock had been defeated, they did not know it.

Throughout the terrible Yellow Jacket days, Deborah Cortland also had worked. Her energy, her vitality, had been astounding. A privileged character, she had been permitted to visit places where no other outsider had been allowed.

She worked in a frenzy of concentration, and now—haggard and unutterably weary—she sat in the parlor of the O'Mara mansion and apologetically showed her sketches to Malcolm Douglas.

The work had a rough, unfinished vitality that amazed him. She had avoided the obvious, and by so doing she had caught tragic depths which few others had seen. A woman standing alone, staring at the smoke billowing up from a mine shaft, the suggestion of a crowd in the background, two children, hands clasped, looking at something—you couldn't see what—except that you knew from their expressions; a forlorn donkey, one of the famous Washoe canaries,

still hitched to the little ore car, and spilling over the side at the end of the arm of a man who had died and been brought to the surface too late; a drawing of light and shadow in which there were no specific outlines—a picture of Tragedy itself represented by a pall of gloom over everything; an engineer with his hands on the controls of his hoisting machinery, his eyes fixed, jaw grim, the intensity of his expression giving mute testimony to the nature of the work he was doing, a half dozen crude pine coffins stacked near one of the pan mills . . . and a baby playing in the dirt nearby

Those were the scenes Deborah Cortland had sketched—those and dozens more. Some, she would leave as they were; others she would rework in greater detail. All were authentic, none were merely photographic. She had sought the spirit of the disaster, and she had found it. And now she was emotionally dry, stripped of any feeling, incapable of effort or of thought. She was pleased with Malcolm's enthusiasm, but it really didn't matter much. Nothing mattered. She was too exhausted. She had nothing left—nothing.

Deborah and Malcolm sat side by side on the big shiny sofa with its mohair upholstery, and he had looked at her sketches for the dozenth time and then replaced them gently in the portfolio. He had said all he knew how to say, which wasn't much, really, and they were shoulder to shoulder, sharing a letdown, sharing memories.

Then suddenly, amazingly, she began to cry. At first he couldn't believe it. Deborah crying? She hadn't cried when she had moved amid heartbreak or when she'd comforted women who had just learned that they were widows. She hadn't cried when, together, they had taken Barbara Hamilton back to the mansion and put her to bed, when, with Mom, they had sat watching the girl who had been a singer of sweet songs come to slow and awful realization that her husband was somewhere in one of the burning galleries of the Yellow Jacket and that she would never see him again. No, Deborah hadn't cried then, she had not cried with pity for others or with pity for herself. But now she was crying because there was nothing left of herself, because there was nothing more that demanded effort.

Malcolm put his arm around her and drew her against him. It was a spontaneous gesture, and he didn't know what impelled it. Her body was surprisingly soft and feminine, her reaction was that of a woman utterly bereft of the strength to resist. He said, "You poor kid . . . you poor kid," and rested his cheek against hers, understanding and yet not understanding, experiencing a strange emotion which he was too weary to try to analyze.

They did not see Mom as she came to the foot of the stairway, glanced into the parlor and then backed off. Big, placid, wise Mom,

who already understood more than either of the young folks on the sofa understood; Mom who stood guard in the hall and let no one else intrude.

And after a while Deborah pulled away from Malcolm and looked long into his eyes. She said, "You do understand, don't you?" and he said Yes, he thought he did.

She confessed that she was tired, that upstairs seemed too far away, and Malcolm rose and picked her up in his arms and started for the hallway.

There he found Mom, and said: "She needs to sleep for twenty-four hours, Mom. I'll take her upstairs. You undress her and see that she isn't bothered."

He carried her into her room and placed her gently on the bed. Her dark hair, which had become loosened, tumbled about her perfectly shaped face, giving it a softness he'd never noticed before any more than he had noticed the rich curves of her slender figure. Mom brought the portfolio and put it on the bureau. Then she sent Malcolm out of the room, advising him to get some rest too.

She undressed Deborah and tucked her in bed. She drew the heavy plush draperies and returned to the side of the exhausted girl. "You'll sleep now," she said, and Deborah smiled and said Yes, she'd sleep.

Then she said, "Will you look after Malcolm too, Mom?"

"Of course I will."

She sat holding Deborah's hand, watched the eyes close drowsily. Deborah spoke only once before going to sleep. Her words were scarcely distinguishable, they came as though from a great distance.

"Malcolm is very strong, isn't he, Mom?"

Mom smiled and nodded. "Yes," she whispered. "He's very strong." And then she added, "Almost strong enough."

XL

MALCOLM DOUGLAS WAS VISITING Mathew D. Clayton in the latter's office. The brittle little attorney was smiling his thin, bloodless smile; his words were sardonic.

"So you see," said Clayton, "it doesn't matter now. You can quit trying to compromise with your conscience. The Rattlesnake is ruined. It's the end of Logan Berkeley."

Malcolm had been thinking of that. It was to discuss it that he again had sought this bright-eyed, shrewd little man.

"Why is it the end of Berkeley?" he asked. "He's a fairly wealthy man. He doesn't need the mine."

Clayton laughed shortly. "You don't yet understand the Comstock, Malcolm. Logan has already started work to restore his mine. Its timbering was destroyed, so it will have to be re timbered. He will spend everything he has accumulated in the attempt to bring it back into production, and he won't succeed."

"Why won't he?"

"Because the mine is too badly damaged. His capital will be gone before he even approaches the rich ore again. I've had reports from all the damaged mines. The Rattlesnake is damaged worse than the Kentuck, and Mackay is writing that one off. You can be sure he knows what he's doing. Oh, he'll make a sort of effort, but it won't be serious."

"You say Logan Berkeley has already started work to restore the Rattlesnake?"

"Yes."

"And that he won't succeed because he hasn't enough capital to carry through?"

"Right. It's nothing new, Malcolm. Once you've had a bonanza mine, you never give up. You gambled at the beginning on some thing which was uncertain, you can't resist gambling again on what looks like a certainty. Logan Berkeley will prove no different from all the others I've watched."

"But look . . . we know the Rattlesnake was paying."

"Sure. They had hit a beautiful ore pocket. Those pockets are not inexhaustible. For all we know, the Rattlesnake may have been about to pinch out anyway. It might have continued to produce for a few more months. What Logan Berkeley can't stand—what no independent owner can stand—is pouring money into a nonproductive mine. You'll see." Clayton was watching his visitor closely. "Berkeley's capital will give out long before they ever hoist another ton of millable quartz from the Rattlesnake."

Malcolm Douglas was still thinking about that when he left Mathew Clayton and walked up C Street toward the office of the *Enterprise*.

Just before crossing the street, he heard someone calling him. He turned to find Deborah Cortland approaching. Gayly, she invited him to be her guest for lunch at the International. They went into the ornate dining room, found a corner table, ordered, and then, with a youthful enthusiasm which delighted him, she showed him a letter

she had just received from *Harper's Weekly* accepting a dozen of her sketches of the Yellow Jacket fire, praising her work inordinately, and asking for more.

They talked about a number of things: about her work, about a trip she had made recently to the Carson Valley, where there were actually trees and leaves and grass and flowers; about Manny Hirsch having moved away from the mansion in an effort to forestall trouble between himself and Gregory Drake, about the Yellow Jacket fire and its aftermath.

He said, "Logan Berkeley is hard at work trying to restore the Rattlesnake."

She said, "Of course. What else would he do?"

"Save his money. I understand that he couldn't possibly have enough capital to put it on a paying basis again or any assurance that he hadn't pretty nearly exhausted the rich ore vein before the fire."

She said, "Logan would never sit back idly. You know that, Malcolm."

"I'm merely repeating what mining men are saying. The best he can hope to do is lose what he's made so far."

"Which," she said, "would please you, wouldn't it?"

He met her eyes levelly. "Yes," he said, "I believe it would."

She said, "You're nice, Malcolm. I like you. I even admire you. But there's something unnatural about this feeling you have about Logan."

He said, "It's not unnatural."

"It doesn't belong in Virginia City." She leaned forward and spoke intensely. "Listen, Malcolm. Why don't you forget it? All right, so you resented Logan's success with the Rattlesnake and his refusal to give you the partnership, you thought you were entitled to. You resented his newly acquired wealth which seemed to put you right back where you had been as boys. Now, by your own statement, he's about to lose that advantage, he's about to pour that wealth into a hole in the ground that used to be a productive mine. If it works out that way, you'll have the satisfaction of seeing him reduced to your financial level. Would that please you?"

"Yes."

"You don't regard that feeling as unworthy?"

"No."

"You have no sympathy for him?"

"None."

"Suppose everything you say is true? Suppose he had recognized your claim to half his mine. Where would you be now? You'd be

joining him in this frantic effort to salvage something you say cannot be salvaged. You would both wind up bankrupt."

"I'd still like it better. And since it isn't to be that way, I shall enjoy seeing him stripped of his arrogance."

"Is 'arrogance' the right word, Malcolm?"

"I think so. A smug superiority, a certainty that whatever Logan Berkeley touches will be right just because Logan Berkeley has touched it."

She hesitated before speaking again. She picked up a fork and drew a neat little pattern on the tablecloth. Then she looked straight at him.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Malcolm, that you are the superior person, that you have greater ability, greater resiliency, greater potentiality, than Logan? Has it ever occurred to you that he is superior to you only because you have trained yourself to think that way, and that actually—no matter what happens materially—the situation will not have been changed spiritually?"

He smiled thinly. "You sound like Father Manogue," he said.

"I couldn't do better. There's a man who sees life clearly and whole. He'd tell you that your present viewpoint is petty and mean."

"Why?"

"Because you're not seeking to elevate yourself. You're merely exulting over the possible self-destruction of a man whom you have taught yourself to dislike."

Malcolm said, "Things are different now."

"Althea?"

"Yes—Althea."

She tried to keep her voice impersonal. "You must have loved her very much, Malcolm."

"Must I?" His eyes were cold and hard. "I suppose I did—once."

"And now?"

"It's all gone. She threw me over and married Logan because he was rich. Not because of the kind of man he was, but because of what he had. It would have been that way if all three of us had been back in South Carolina, if she had been in love with an overseer's son, and had then met the owner of the plantation. She'd have made herself believe that she was in love with the man when actually she was in love with his position, with what he could offer. I'd have resented the reasons for her choice there, I'd have hated the man who took her away from me on that basis. I'm merely doing the same thing here. At least I'm consistent."

"Has it ever occurred to you that Logan might be utterly unaware of all this?"

"He's not a fool. He knows."

"And what," asked Deborah carefully, "will Althea do if this dire prophecy of yours comes true?"

"I don't know. But I shan't be sorry for her."

Deborah said, "You may be right by Comstock standards, Malcolm. But what is the Comstock? Two miles of rich earth. An isolated community of grim, selfish people exploited by others even more grim and selfish. You won't always live on the Comstock."

"Maybe not. But I have a feeling, Deborah, that the man who leaves here with the Comstock philosophy and nothing else will be better off than most."

"You don't really mean that."

"I do, though." He regarded her steadily. "I've determined one thing, Deborah. I'm never again going to be trapped by sentimentality. I have a goal and I'll work toward it. I may never get there, but I'll always be trying. And I won't be handicapping myself by outmoded notions of honor and ethics. And, if I may ask, why does Logan Berkeley mean so much to you?"

"He doesn't. You do."

Her directness startled him. "I?" he said vaguely.

"Yes—you. I thought I'd found in you the sort of man I'd been looking for. Oh! I'm not talking about love." She said it authoritatively, but her eyes gave the lie to her words. "I'm talking about you as a man, as a friend. Strength and decency and courage and humanity and intelligence, all rolled up into one masculine package. And now, to watch you injuring yourself. If—if I weren't a lady, Malcolm, I'd call you a damned fool."

She made him feel awkward and uncomfortable. She made him feel as though she knew him too well, perhaps better than he knew himself.

That she, of all people, should cling so tenaciously to the false gods of a social era that was gone; that she, herself a rebel, a fugitive from false standards, should disapprove the course to which he had consecrated himself—that bothered him. And so he took refuge in lightness. He said, "And since you are a lady, what would you call me?"

"A damned fool!" she replied, quietly and bitterly. "The stupidest, most inexcusable damned fool I've ever met."

XLI

THROUGH THE HOT SUMMER and blustery fall of 1869, and well into the harsh winter that followed, Malcolm Douglas tried to avoid meeting himself face to face. He did not ask himself why he derived such intense pleasure from the spectacle of Logan Berkeley's decline. He looked forward eagerly to the day when Logan would be nothing but a man who had once been the owner of a rich small mine and who now had joined the army of Comstockians who had nothing to show for it but memories.

Because, of course, Logan could not win. The Rattlesnake was still flooded, its stopes and galleries defied the construction work Logan was able to afford. True, the workers daily got closer to what had been the productive level. They got closer but they never quite reached it. For all practical purposes they might as well not have begun.

That was all Malcolm wanted to know—that the gamble Logan was making was a poor one. There was no doubt in his mind as to what Logan would do. The man wasn't a quitter. Once he started a thing, he'd carry it through. He'd pour his last cent into that shaft. What annoyed Malcolm (though he never admitted it, even to himself) was the equal certainty that when Logan had been whipped, and when he had reached the inevitable time when there was nothing left—no money, no elegance, no exalted position—then, at that time, Logan Berkeley would still be smiling and debonair.

Something was wrong, reflected Malcolm. Back in South Carolina such gay insouciance would have been expected, it would have been the only thing possible. Back there the Berkeleys belonged, their position was unassailable, they were above being affected by material considerations. Wealthy planters or barbed-wire ex-Confederates, they'd still be the Berkeleys, just as Malcolm Douglas would always be Malcolm Douglas.

And why? he asked himself fiercely. Is it true that I am inferior? Is it true that quality can be born in a man but not acquired? I'm as intelligent as Logan. I have a better education. I'm as honest and as courageous. What is this thing which he has which I have not, and which, therefore, I resent? Why is it that I get so little genuine satisfaction out of the collapse of his fortunes? Is it because the thing I

really decided that to see his moral obligation and that I now realize I will never see that.

He thought of Althea. Now that the Rattlesnake had been eliminated as the symbol of enmity, she assumed greater importance. If Logan failed completely, if his money gave out, how would Althea react? Had she ever been in love with her husband? Certainly not at the time she married him. But since then, Malcolm wasn't too clear about whether love could grow out of marriage; he'd always been taught that it was the other way around. If Logan lost her . . . no, that wouldn't be enough, either. If he could take her from Logan . . .

He drew a deep breath, feeling that this was a new goal. It was not enmeshed with softness or sentiment. Logan had become an obsession with him. He had begun to believe that he could only prove himself by disproving the other man.

But there was still Althea to consider. Even when Logan lost his mine and his money, he'd be as well off as Malcolm. To be a reporter in Virginia City was no spectacular thing to offer a girl; certainly it was not enough of a prize to cause Althea to relinquish what she had.

His thoughts went back to Logan Berkeley. Logan had been defeated, but Malcolm had not won. He had not even contributed to Logan's defeat. There was no sense of personal triumph.

That was what Malcolm wanted. The need for it grew and grew and grew within him. To prove himself a better man than Logan Berkeley—if not by outmoded South Carolina standards, then by the standards of Virginia City. It was his one ambition, his, single thought.

If he could have one lucky break. If he could dangle before Althea a material prize that she would not refuse, being what she was. If, by so doing, he could take her away from Logan, that would be something tangible.

Malcolm didn't even know if he still loved Althea. But because she was now Logan's, he wanted her. It was confused, involved, complicated. He was finding it difficult to live with himself. He was all mixed up inside. He became silent and grim and determined, concentrating all his energies to one end.

Malcolm worked and studied. He was developing into an excellent journalist. He kept his eyes and ears open. And because he did, he came in personal contact with John Mackay, lately become an important figure on the Comstock. It happened one bitterly cold night in February of 1870.

XLII

THE YEAR 1870 started poorly on the Comstock. The previous year had been filled with discouragement and disaster. Those who were not too heavily committed would have quit had not two mines, the Yellow Jacket and the Chollar-Potosi, struck rich, though limited, bodies of ore.

In the great Gould & Curry mine the walls of the Lode had come together, pinching out. The upper-level bonanzas had virtually played out at about the 500-foot level. All of the mines were having major trouble with an increasing flow of water. Pumping facilities were inadequate.

Yellow Jacket was doing well beyond the line of the April fire. Savage and Hale & Norcross had held out considerable hope, but their optimism could not last forever in the face of discouraging results. There was a belief that great new ore bodies might be found below the 1,000-foot level, but there was nothing, really, on which to base that hope—no definite geological indication.

The discouragement spread to the San Francisco Exchange. Stockholders were becoming weary of the continual assessments, and were relinquishing their shares rather than continuing to pay. The market value of all mines on the Comstock eventually dropped below the actual value of the machinery in the mines.

Men deserted the Comstock in search of great new bonanzas elsewhere: at the silver camp at Pioche and the new silver-lead camp at Eureka. Both were picturesque, both were wild. The miner always possesses the soul of a prospector, and gravitates naturally toward the unknown. There was no reason to believe that Pioche or Eureka would produce on a scale similar to that experienced in Virginia City—even in depression times—but there was always the unquenchable hope, the optimism, the experiment, the adventure, the belief that one might be lucky.

Malcolm was learning. He had a precise mind, and he studied not only the Comstock but the factors outside the Comstock which contributed to its career. He had never learned to swing a pick or to plant a charge of giant powder, but he was becoming more and more familiar with the actual motivating factors of this strange new world.

In November of 1869, the first, and most important, stretch of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad had been opened with innumerable speeches to which nobody listened, and with tremendous drunkenness in which almost everyone shared. And now Virginia City and Gold Hill were connected with the mills in the Carson Valley twelve months a year, without dependence on the vagaries of the weather, which actually weren't vagaries at all, but downright chronic meaness from early fall until early summer.

Malcolm was impressed—and amused—by the accuracy of a prophecy Mathew Clayton had made long ago; that now that the important part of the railroad was an actuality, it belonged personally to the triumvirate which controlled the Bank crowd: Sharon, Ralston, and Mills. Not one cent of their personal fortunes had been risked in its building, but the profits would all be theirs.

Malcolm found his trip over the new road stimulating and astonishing. Its trackage was twenty-one miles with a ruling grade of 2.2 per cent. Engineers estimated accurately that in a journey from Gold Hill to Carson the road made twenty two full circles. This was reported to William Sharon, who said, "The Virginia & Truckee is the crookedest railroad in the world," a statement which was capable of being construed in any way you wanted to construe it.

As a newspaperman, Malcolm established contact with important figures he would not otherwise have met. He twice interviewed William Sharon; and though he found him egotistical, vain, overconfident, and brilliant, he learned much, and went away from the interview feeling a dislike for the man, as well as keen admiration.

He interviewed John J. Jones, Crown Point superintendent, who was already assuming heroic stature as the hero of the Yellow Jacket fire. Jones had done well, of course, but Malcolm knew that he'd done no more than scores of other men. It was merely that when Jones performed his valorous deeds, his position as superintendent glamorized acts which were no more heroic than others which were being done all around him. Malcolm made a note of that. He was making notes of many things, and most of what he was learning fused into the pattern of his cynicism. Achievement was what counted; method was secondary or completely unimportant.

The more he learned, the more he studied, and the more he wanted to know. He collected the legends of the Comstock—none more than twelve years old, which made them probably the youngest legends in history—and commenced to draw conclusions.

Luck! There; apparently, was the single indispensable factor. Unless you were lucky, the rest didn't count. But there was more to it than that, and it was the second phase that interested him: to know

enough about the country to recognize luck when it came to you.

Old Henry Comstock, hadn't recognized it. He had claimed the entire Lode; he had given it his name; yet he hadn't possessed sufficient intelligence to realize what he had. And so he had sold his rights to the richest body of land in the world for \$11,000 and lost that puny sum in a supply business in Carson City. The men who had given their names to the great mines on the Lode were gone. They had been lucky, but they hadn't had the intelligence to appreciate the extent of their luck, and to profit by it.

Yes, Malcolm figured, you had to play it that way: Be on your toes for the lucky break; have the intelligence to recognize it as luck; then have the ability, the courage, and the aggressiveness to exploit it.

And yet, when luck first intruded upon Malcolm Douglas, he did not recognize it as such. To him it was merely an interesting episode, briefly exciting, and to be forgotten for a long time. He did not know, on the bitter February night when he decided to drink in the Crystal instead of the Sawdust Corner saloon, that he had made a decision destined to influence his entire future.

The Crystal was noted for its food as well as for its liquor. It was therefore not surprising to find John Mackay seated alone at a corner table finishing his dinner. He had met Mackay twice: once on the occasion of the first show of the Carmichael troupe at the Opera House, when Mackay had been selected as one of the judges to vouch for the authenticity of the knifes he threw at Althea; the second time was briefly at the burning shaft of the Kentucky mine the preceding April. Malcolm, therefore, did not consider that he knew Mackay, and Mackay gave no sign of knowing him.

Malcolm went to the bar and ordered whisky, which, in an expensive place like the Crystal, cost twenty-five cents. He listened to an argument between the bartender and two men on his own left. They were debating the future of the Lode with great earnestness. One man insisted that it was played out, the other two stubbornly maintained that that was not so, that the evidence proved otherwise.

"What evidence?" inquired the doubter.

"The big guys," argued the bartender. "The Bank crowd workin' their mines, buildin' this railroad, drifting deeper. Hell, they ain't just wastin' their time and money. They know somethin' we don't know. And why is Sharon fightin' so hard against Sutro and his tunnel? Answer me that."

"On account he don't like Sutro. He don't want no tunnel he's got to pay \$4 a ton to."

"But if he's figurin' to quit mining, then he don't have to pay

nobody nothin'. He's spending a fortune to lick Sutro. That's because he expects to make a bigger fortune right where Sutro is working, and that's at deeper levels on the Lode."

Malcolm wasn't much interested. He'd heard all the pros and cons of the argument dozens of times. He was inclined to agree with the bartender, anyway. He sipped his drink and closed his mind to the discussion on his left.

And that was how he happened to hear the drunken mutterings of the man on his right. He was a big man who poured huge drinks from a whisky bottle, tossing them into his gullet with reckless abandon, and working himself up into a magnificent lury.

"Mackay!" he kept muttering. "That son of a bitch! Kicked me outa my job. . . . Won't leave me get no other . . . spreadin' the word I stole from him . . . sayin' I was the one let it be known he'd hit a bonanza in Hale & Norcross." Another huge drink. "S'pose I did. Who the hell is he, he should make millions while I don't have no job? Him an' all them rich guys. But 'specially him. Ought to kill the bastard, tha's what I ought to do."

Malcolm paid small heed to the drunken threats. He heard those all the time, too. Little dog barking at big dog. It was the satisfaction you got out of being a little dog, the penalty you paid for being a big one. He heard the man mutter, ". . . got a gun . . . kill the bastard tonight . . ." but he still did not take it seriously, certainly not until he saw John Mackay leave the Crystal. The door closed behind him, and the big man on Malcolm's right clinked two silver dollars on the bar and started after him. Then, for the first time, Malcolm sensed that the situation could be serious.

He didn't know positively nobody could know. The stranger was big, but Mackay was also a powerful man. He knew how to take care of himself—except that you were helpless against a pistol. Malcolm's instinct sent him out of the Crystal on the heels of the big man.

Mackay walked down C Street and then turned up the hill. Malcolm had heard he was living in the home of Jim Fair, his partner. That would be two or three blocks up the mountain. On a bitter, windy night such as this, the section would be deserted with no traffic, and few pedestrians. Malcolm felt an odd excitement, a tightening of his stomach muscles, an alerting of his senses. His right hand moved under his heavy jacket and reassuringly touched the shaft of the throwing knife he carried in lieu of a pistol.

The big stranger turned just as Mackay had turned. He followed the owner of Kentuck and Hale & Norcross, increasing his pace and closing the distance between them. Once he looked around, but

something had warned Malcolm that he was about to turn, and he had flattened himself against a wall.

Now he knew the situation was serious. He closed in on the man even faster than the man narrowed the distance between himself and John Mackay. Mackay turned the corner of A Street, high, high up on Mount Davidson, and twenty feet beyond the corner it happened.

The man pulled a pistol out of his pocket. He called hoarsely, "Hey! You! John Mackay!"

Mackay turned. Malcolm, just coming around the corner, saw Mackay's figure tense, saw his eyes narrow. Mackay saw, Mackay understood, and Mackay did not flinch. He said, "What do you want?"

The man said, "So you reckernize me, huh?"

"Yes. I recognize you." Mackay was speaking slowly, quietly, carefully. He didn't trip over his speech now, the little stammer that usually affected it was no longer there.

The man raised his pistol and aimed it at Mackay's head. Drunk as he was, his hand was steady. He began cursing, tensely, bitterly, fiercely, whipping himself into a homicidal frenzy. There was no question of his intention, no doubt that at that distance he wouldn't miss.

Any second now Malcolm knew there was no use calling out, and there would be no time to close with the assassin. He pulled the throwing knife out of his belt. He hefted the blade, feeling the old familiar balance. He steadied his nerves and his muscles as he had done when he'd been with the show.

He drew back his arm and threw. The knife spun through the air, gleaming like a tiny lightning streak. There was a gentle thud, a gasp. The man's pistol arm started to sag, and the body followed, folding . . . slowly . . . slowly. There wasn't enough strength left in the finger to pull the trigger. The man pitched forward, his face plowing into the hard-packed snow of A Street. He was dead by the time he hit the ground.

John Mackay moved toward the body. He saw the knife, then let his eyes travel upward until they met Malcolm's eyes. He said simply, "Thanks."

Malcolm reached down and pulled the knife out of the body. He took out a handkerchief, wiped the blade, and returned the knife to his belt. Mackay said, in his customary slow, level way, "How did you happen to be here?"

Malcolm explained, briefly, wasting no words. Mackay listened patiently. He said, "I am deeply in your debt, Douglas."

Malcolm said, "You owe me nothing."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know. But that had nothing to do with it, I assure you. I'd have done it for anybody."

"You happen to have done it for me," Mackay smiled slightly.

"Very neatly, too. I remember seeing you at the Opera House. Shall we have a drink?"

Malcolm looked down at the body. Mackay answered the unspoken question. "We'll notify the coroner. There'll be no trouble."

They returned to the Crystal. Each ordered whisky and they drank silently. Mackay said, "I enjoy p-p-paying my debts, Douglas."

Malcolm said: "You've paid it, Mr. Mackay. The whisky was fine. Good night."

He turned and went out into the street, into the wind and the cold.

John Mackay stood at the bar, staring at the door through which Malcolm Douglas had just gone. His eyes were thoughtful.

"Interesting," he said to himself. "A most interesting young man."

XLIII

IT WAS NOT UNTIL the end of the year that Logan Berkeley told his wife what he had known for some time: he was beaten.

It had been a losing fight from the beginning, but he hadn't acknowledged it until too late, until he had thrown back into the Rattlesnake all the profit the mine had yielded.

The lower levels were still flooded. No matter how fast or furiously they were pumped out, they filled again; the roofs of the galleries had collapsed when the square sets burned, and there was nothing left to support them. By the beginning of 1871 Logan had not yet approached the levels he'd been working on before the fire, and now he knew he would never reach them.

As an individual, Logan Berkeley was a fine gambler and a magnificent loser. He'd have been willing to shrug it off and accept his ill luck as he'd accept the unfortunate turn of a card. But that wasn't the way it was; it wasn't that simple.

There was Althea to consider.

They had been absurdly happy. At least Logan Berkeley had been happy, and he presumed that Althea had been happy too. He wondered why he only presumed that she had been happy. Why had that word popped into his head? Yet, as he faced the prospect of a frank

talk with her regarding their changed economic status, he encountered an instinctive reluctance which defied explanation. He felt that he had no right to feel the way he did, that his avoidance of frankness with his wife was unjust to her.

One night, after the Chinese servants had left, he talked to her.

Outside, the wind howled, so that if you listened long enough you would shiver despite the warmth and snugness of the parlor. Logan stood with his back to the fire. He was very tall and very handsome. His mustache was freshly and neatly trimmed, he had donned a white shirt and a black broadcloth suit, and he wore a wide black tie which had been knotted carefully and in which there was a scarf-pin exquisitely wrought in gold from his mine.

Althea sat demurely on the couch. She looked lovely in a new gown of dark green taffeta which billowed from hips to feet but which was cut so extravagantly low that a liberal expanse of bosom was exposed. The firelight sent little shadows dancing across her face, giving an impression of rare delicacy. At that moment she might have been mistress of the plantation house at Big Cypress. The appearance of fragility—false as he knew it to be—gave Logan an uncomfortable feeling, as though the thing he proposed to do was unjust.

He drew a deep breath, exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke, and smiled fondly. He said, "You look very beautiful tonight, darling."

"Only tonight?"

"Especially tonight." He knew this was the wrong approach, so he began afresh. "We've got things to discuss," he said. "Important things."

She smiled at him, and waited, saying nothing.

"The Rattlesnake is finished," he stated quietly. "I'll never be able to put it in production again."

She said: "That's too bad, Logan. I'm sorry."

"It's more than too bad. Much more."

"How much?"

"I've made a poor gamble." He smiled. "How would you like being the wife of an ordinary miner?"

Something cold and unpleasant reached deep inside her. She controlled herself with an effort.

"I'd adore it, Logan," she answered steadily. "If the day ever comes—"

"It has come."

"I declare, Logan Berkeley, you do exaggerate so."

"I'm afraid I don't. Not this time, my dear. We not only have a mine that isn't producing, but our money has gone."

"Gone where?"

"Back into the mine.

"But Logan! You don't mean *all* our money. Not all?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"But that's impossible. We were rich."

He said: "I don't mind for myself. I'm sorry you have to share our new poverty."

"My goodness! You always carry things so far. You use that word as though you meant it. I don't like the way it sounds. It's horrid."

"It's true, Althea. I've tried to keep it from you, but the time has come when you've got to know."

She kept her eyes downcast, so that he would not see the angry, resentful light in them.

"Tell me all the truth, Logan."

"We'll have to sell this house—if we can find someone in these hard times who is willing to buy it. We'll get rid of the servants and the horses and carriages. Perhaps we'll get a room with your parents next door. We should come out of it with enough money to keep us comfortable until I can begin to earn a decent living."

"My jewelry?" There was a note of panic in her voice.

"That is yours," he replied with quiet dignity. "At least you won't have to sell it to support me."

She lifted her eyes now, staring at him incredulously. Her first hope—that Logan was exaggerating—had been dispelled. She was trying to readjust her perspective, to see him in the light of his present circumstances.

She could not immediately dissociate Logan from the conception of wealth. She let herself snap back to the days before she had married him, to the days of grim austerity and hardship, the days when she had kept her true feelings bottled up, when she had been all things to all people, when no one had known or understood her except her mother and Malcolm Douglas.

She could not grasp the idea that what Logan told her was true, or that, if true, it was more than a temporary condition. Hadn't he been in *borrasca* before? Hadn't he created his own bonanza? What right had she to presume that what he once had accomplished could not be repeated?

Althea had a hard core of common sense. She was strong, not weak. She had never wept over the might-have-beens and never-woulds. The golden scepter with which she had ruled her little world was no longer golden; it was not even a scepter any more.

But she knew that nothing was to be gained by reproaches, by nagging, by fretting. Her thoughts were her own, as they always had

been her own. She had learned to live within herself, and once again she could put that lesson to use.

She could not dismiss the image of Logan as a successful man. The quality which had brought success once would bring it again. Very well, that was the way she would act. She would be the devoted, confident wife. She had nothing to lose by that and, perhaps, much to gain. And it wouldn't be too difficult, for she was genuinely fond of her husband. Not in love with him, perhaps, but certainly fond of him.

She arrived at her conclusion quickly, and once having determined on a course of action, she did not weaken it by procrastination.

She rose from the couch and stood in front of her husband. She put her arms about his neck and raised her face to his. She said, "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

He did not know—he could not know—that she was acting, that she was making the best of what she now suspected might turn out to be a very bad bargain indeed.

She had estimated the man and his reaction with uncanny prescience. She could not possibly have selected words more calculated to restore his confidence in himself or to enhance his devotion.

His arms closed about her hungrily. He was utterly defenceless against her courageous loyalty. He kissed her upturned lips with fierce, demanding passion. He picked her up in his arms and carried her upstairs to the bedroom. Mere words were inadequate to express his emotions. . . .

Later, as they lay side by side on the bed, relaxed and physically exhausted, her mind probed into the immediate future, and she knew apprehension.

She clenched her fists and stared into the semidarkness of the fire-lit room.

"Oh, God," she prayed for the first and only time since she had married Logan Berkeley, "dear God, please don't let me get pregnant

XLIV

MALCOLM DOUGLAS HAD COMPLETED a letter to his uncle. He scarcely knew the man, and cared for him not at all, but a sense of duty impelled him to write.

Save for their common blood, there was no bond between them.

Therefore, in line of duty, Malcolm wrote to his uncle of the Comstock. The letter was dated March 3, 1871.

DEAR UNCLE BRUCE:

I sincerely trust that this letter will find you in good health. May I apologize for not having written for so long a time. I have been quite busy.

I am still employed as a reporter on the *Enterprise*, which is probably our best newspaper. I find the work interesting and instructive.

You wrote me once that you were interested in everything that went on here. I presume, therefore, that you still are. It is my hope that you are not speculating in mining stocks, for every fortune made by such speculations, a score of fortunes are lost. However, one cannot live in Virginia City and fail to experience a certain excitement when new discoveries are reported.

Actually, we have no other excitement. I am told that in its early days Virginia City was a very wild place, but that can scarcely be said now. Of course there is a great deal of violence, but it is the customary thing, chiefly saloon brawls between drunken men. The community is lawless by your standards, but it does not seem so when you have lived here for some time. There is open gambling and there are many houses of ill repute on D Street, which is just one block from our principal thoroughfare. I have also heard that there are opium dens in the Chinese section of the "lower town," though I have never visited them personally.

Things have been quite discouraging since the Yellow Jacket fire of April, 1869, which is almost two yrs. ago. However, certain events are transpiring which would indicate that this city and its neighbor, Gold Hill, may be about to experience a boom of greater proportions than any which has yet been had. I hope that you will not take the information I am giving as sufficiently authentic to justify your purchase of the shares which are known as "Comstocks." What I write is based on rumor, and I wish to remind you that for every rumor which proves true, there are a dozen which are false.

You may recall that when I wrote you of the Yellow Jacket fire, I mentioned my admiration for Mr. Jno. P. Jones, superintendent of the Crown Point mine. He is held in high esteem in this region.

Well, just before the end of this past year, Mr. Jones reported a new discovery at the 1,100-foot level of the Crown Point. This, of course, is of greatest interest to what we call the Bank crowd, headed by Sharon, Mills, and Ralston, because they have for years controlled the Crown Point and also the Belcher, which adjoins it. You are not to confuse the Belcher with the Best & Belcher, which is in another part of the Lode, and has never been productive. One of Mr. Jones' associates is a Mr. Alvinza Hayward, who I believe is his brother-in-law.

At any rate, on last Nov. 19, Crown Point stock was listed at \$3 per share, and on Dec. 10, it had risen to \$16. During the same period the market price of Belcher stock rose to \$7.50 a share, a very high figure considering the record of the mine. Of course, all of this may be manipulation

by those on the "inside." I suspect that this is the case because Supt. Jones' reports have not actually been encouraging, except for the announcement that a new "discovery" had been made. The rise in Belcher stock is because the Crown Point discovery (if indeed there was one) was made within 200 feet of the Belcher line. As it lies on the footwall of the Lode (according to rumor), there would seem to be every probability that it could extend into the Belcher.

There is a strong feeling here that the careful buying of Crown Point stock is being done by Jno. P. Jones & Alvinza Hayward personally. If so, this would indicate a rift in the hitherto solid ranks of the Bank crowd. Only time will prove whether my conjecture is sound, as one can hear any rumor one wishes to hear by walking just a few blocks and listening to the saloon gossip.

I cannot help feeling that if indeed Messrs. Jones & Hayward are seceding from the Bank crowd, the move might be beneficial to this area. The other independent firm of Jno. Mackay, Jas. Fair, etc., is becoming more important every day.

The little mine of which I am proprietor (Big Cypress) is still in bor-tusia. It is in a poor section of the Lode, and I have no idea of attempting to do anything with it.

Virginia City is not at all what you would expect when you think of the vast expanse of the Far West. In the business district, the buildings are wall to wall, thus creating the impression of a large city. The Lode runs right under the main portion of the town, and mine shafts are everywhere. Every person apparently wishes to live within sight of the mines, as though they would vanish if he ceased to look at them.

My health continues excellent, and I trust this letter finds you the same.

Affectionately & respt.,
Your nephew,
MALCOLM

Malcolm was seated in a chair near the window of the corner room in which Deborah Cortland lived and worked. She was in another chair, reading her letter in the fast fading afternoon light.

The room was both neat and in disorder: neat as far as the living quarters of a young lady were concerned, disorderly in that artist's materials were everywhere.

Deborah finished reading, folded the letter carefully, and passed it back to Malcolm. He said, somewhat awkwardly, "What do you think of it, Deborah?"

"Terrible! I think that's the driest letter I ever read."

He frowned, then smiled and shrugged. "What else is there to write? I don't know my uncle. The only things we have in common is an interest in anything relating to money."

"Couldn't you have copied the reports of the San Francisco Exchange? He'd have found them more thrilling."

Malcolm was still smiling, still relaxed. His afternoon visits to Deborah's room had become more frequent of late. At first they had been conducted with formality and dignity, with elaborate excuses, with the door always left open. Now it was casual: he dropped in, watched her work for a while, chatted, and enjoyed himself. It was the only place they could be alone.

There was an intimacy in the room that wasn't obtainable in the parlor downstairs or in the dining room of a downtown restaurant. The joyous companionship of walking together, or even of driving, was non-existent, except on the few warm days of midsummer. It was almost always too cold, too windy, and invariably, even in summer, the chill outdoors was too formidable.

Deborah's room wasn't a bedroom, really, it was a studio: the easel, the canvases, the sketch pads and crayons and pencils and the bottle of India ink. . . . They ignored the bed and all its implications. Deborah ignored it. And Malcolm had learned to ignore it, too.

His relationship with Deborah was a surprising thing. It was his first touch of friendship with an attractive woman of his own age. He was flattered by the fact that she obviously liked him, and he was continually amazed by the sense of freedom which he found in her presence.

They talked together as two men would talk—well, almost. There were certain reticences, of course, but there was a frankness and mutual honesty which stimulated them both. She was a woman and yet she wasn't a woman. He was more at ease with her than with anyone else because she was female, and because with a woman a man is privileged to be more himself than with another man.

With a male friend, for instance he'd always have to maintain a pose. Softness and sentimentality were kept under cover. With Deborah that was unnecessary, even undesirable. It was pleasant to speak his more intimate thoughts occasionally. He was deeply fond of her, yet he wasn't in love—or, if he was, he didn't know it. Long, long ago he had decided that he was in love with Althea, and any thoughts of love which entered his mind were focused upon Logan Perkeley's wife. There was simply no room in his brain for another sentimental attachment.

Malcolm was neither prudish nor stupid. He was merely blind. Occasionally he caught her regarding him oddly, but he didn't waste time wondering about it. At other times she would be unnecessarily sharp with him, and he didn't try to understand that, either. She was Deborah; she was different; she was one of the outstanding characters of the Comstock because she always had done—and still continued to do—things which no other woman dared.

There was a bond between them, no mistaking that. But she was more aware of the quality of that bond than he would ever be. She also understood him better than he understood himself.

"The trouble with you," she said, still speaking of the grimly factual letter he had just written to his uncle, "is that you take life too seriously. You're grim about it."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"No. Of course not. You're not grim when you're with me. You're a different person. You lighten up, you're even merry at times. Why do you have to buckle on your armor the minute you walk through that door?"

"To protect myself."

"From what?"

"Anything. Everything. Repetition of what has happened to me before."

She made an impatient gesture. "No man can protect himself against everything. Why not let things just happen, and then adjust yourself to them?"

"You didn't," he reminded her. "You ran away."

"You're wrong, Malcolm. When I left New York, I was seeking, not escaping."

"You're very clever with words, Deborah."

"But I was! I found it here."

"What?"

"Freedom. The privilege of being myself."

"So have I," he said quietly.

She got up and stood framed against the dusk. "I hate to see you delude yourself, Malcolm. You're naturally a gentle person. You know how to smile, even to laugh. But you have become more Comstock than the Comstock itself. You've swallowed a philosophy which you find indigestible. Why?"

"Because," he said slowly, "I intend to get somewhere. I intend to become a person of importance."

"How?"

"I don't know. I may never succeed. But I understand this, Deborah, I'll always be trying." He, too, stood up. They stood shoulder to shoulder, looking through the same window at the same formidable landscape. "I've been hurt. I'm not going to be hurt again. I've been sentimental, and that's another luxury I'm teaching myself to do without."

"I understand," she said, "why you feel as you do. For your sake, I'm still sorry you feel that way."

"I don't ask sympathy."

"But you need it," she said softly. "You really need it, Malcolm."

He opened his lips to protest, and then a new warm tenderness surged over him. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of his own loneliness, with the knowledge that he had always been lonely, and that he did not wish to be. Only this woman—this strange and different woman, this Deborah Cortland—understood him. With her he wasn't lonely, wasn't all tied up in knots inside. He felt a tremendous sense of gratitude toward her, a great need for her. His hands went out instinctively, groping for her strength that he might cling to it. He was aware of nothing but that primary, elemental need. He wasn't thinking now, not thinking about anything. He bent his head and kissed her.

For an instant the kiss was gentle. Then it took on an urgency, a fierceness. Her response was bewildering. It hadn't been like this with Althea, it couldn't be like this with any other woman in the world.

Then something hit him like a dash of icy water. Suddenly his thoughts were crystal clear. He could see into the future. . . .

Trembling, shaken, he released her. For an instant they stood facing one another, only inches apart.

"I'm sorry, Deborah," he said steadily.

"For what?" Even yet she refused to take cover.

"For what? For what might have happened."

She regarded him gravely. "You're lost, Malcolm," she said. "You're utterly lost."

He didn't know what she meant. He didn't try to know. He murmured something unintelligible, then turned and stumbled from the room.

She stood looking at the door through which he had passed. She felt that she had touched a great happiness and had lost it. She felt that she had been in the arms of a man who truly loved her but who was afraid of his love.

XLV

JOHN W. MACKAY WALKED INTO the office of the *Enterprise*, and no one noticed him. No one ever noticed him or ever would unless they knew who he was.

Mackay was an unobtrusive man, well built, compact, rugged, confident. He had level, far-seeing eyes and great courage as well as

great modesty. The slight hesitancy in his speech, which was a source of embarrassment to him, had given him the habit of choosing his words carefully, of speaking with great deliberation, and of therefore giving to his utterances an impression of profundity which, actually, he did not intend.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, on November 28, 1831, he had arrived in New York with his Scotch-Irish parents in 1840. He didn't care for the young metropolis, its dense population, its tendency to strangle individuality and initiative, and it was not unnatural that shortly after the first extravagant tales of gold in California reached the Eastern seaboard, Mackay shipped for the Far West. He made the long, arduous trip around the Horn and for the ensuing eight years worked quietly and unsuccessfully in the gold camps of the Sierra foothills. For the most part his activities were confined to the north fork of the Yuba and in the rugged country near Downieville.

A hesitant, reticent person, he made few friends, but to those few he was loyal with a directness and simplicity which saw no other course. It was with one of these friends, a large, blustering man named Jack O'Brien, that Mackay set off for Virginia City in 1860. They had managed to exist in the gold fields and that was all; there was no possibility that they could be less successful in their Comstock venture.

They carried all their worldly goods on their broad backs, and they walked because they could not afford any other mode of transportation. Eventually they came within sight of the raw boom town. They paused and looked down upon it. Mackay said to his friend, "How much money you got, Jack?" and O'Brien grinned and said he hadn't a dime.

Mackay reached into his pocket and drew forth a fifty-cent piece. He spun it in the air and caught it. He looked at Jack O'Brien.

"This is all I've got," he said.

He drew back his arm and threw. The half-dollar went spinning through the clear thin air. It hit near a clump of scraggly sagebrush which was covered with the ubiquitous yellow dust, and rolled off toward a little ravine. Mackay smiled and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Now," he said lightly, "we're starting even."

Eleven years had passed since then, and John Mackay had emerged sufficiently from his background for his stature to be discernible. His career thus far had not been meteoric, but it had been steady. There had been hard work and good luck; there had been his early bonanza in the Kentucky, where he had worked as foreman for shares instead of money; there had been his association with Jim Fair and

their subsequent partnership with Flood & O'Brien (not the Jack O'Brien of his early days, however) and their first battle against the entrenched forces of the Bank crowd . . . a conflict out of which Mackay and his friends had emerged with Hale & Norcross in their pockets, with new rich ore bodies in sight, and with the undying enmity of the dapper but powerful William Sharon.

The fact that John Mackay had selected his first major opponent marked him as a man of limitless daring and therefore as someone to be watched. Twice he had ventured: twice he had won. Comstockians developed an almost superstitious confidence in him.

He stood just inside the front door of the *Enterprise*, calm, quiet, and patient, waiting to be noticed. The rattle and bang and confusion of the congested plant seemed not to bother him. He sniffed the distinctive aroma of a printing plant, smiled slightly beneath his mustache, and waited, motionless, looking like any ordinary miner in his heavy boots, denim trousers, flannel shirt, and slouch hat.

Dan De Quille spied him first, and Dan uncoiled his long lanky frame and came across the office with hand outstretched. They smiled at each other and exchanged a few pleasantries, and then John Mackay said he'd like to see Malcolm Douglas.

Though Dan was surprised, he didn't show it. He knew nothing about the episode on A Street; he did not even know that the men had met, save casually in the course of Malcolm's reportorial work.

Dan raised his voice above the din and bawled, "Douglas!" The call was taken up by others and came at length to the ears of Malcolm, who was chatting with one of the compositors. Another man paused in his work of distributing type to relay the summons to Malcolm, and then said, "Ain't that John Mackay?"

Malcolm looked across the smoke-filled plant and nodded.

"And he wants you?" The printer shook his head in mock disbelief. "I'll be God dammed!"

Malcolm poked him good-naturedly in the ribs and picked his way through the confusion. He joined his visitor and Dan De Quille, and Mackay inquired immediately whether Malcolm could join him for a bit of lunch at the Washoe Club. Malcolm hesitated, and Dan nudged him. "Better go," he advised. "Mighty fine food there."

It was not until lunch was almost over that John Mackay mentioned the object of the meeting. He had not referred to the episode of the night when he had faced death; until now he had been talking quietly about generalities. With his eyes fixed steadily on Malcolm's, he came to the point.

"I understand," he said, "that you own the Big Cypress, Malcolm."

Malcolm nodded, wondering briefly what had prompted Mackay

to use his first name, and deducing from it that he had occupied some of Mackay's thinking time.

"What are you planning to do with it?" asked Mackay.

Malcolm smiled and shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "It's in borrasca clear down to China."

"You can't be sure what's in the lower levels."

"I won't find out, either. Drifting costs money, and I haven't any."

Malcolm then asked a direct question. "What's your interest in it?"

"You know anything about Consolidated Virginia?"

Malcolm laughed aloud. "Anybody who works with Dan De Quille knows about that. Ever since I've known him, he's been insisting that there was a bonanza in that section of the Lode."

Mackay said quietly: "There may be. Nobody can ever be s-sure. My partners and I are getting ready to push our shaft deeper. Your Big Cypress adjoins us on the south. I thought maybe you'd like to s-swap your mine for shares in the company."

Malcolm was interested, but merely because the man who made the proposition was John Mackay. Had it been anyone else, he'd have adjudged him crazy. Mackay and his partners had put together about a thousand barren feet of the Lode, combining a group of borrasca mines, and called it Consolidated Virginia. Starting off with the Dick Sides, the White & Murphy, and the old California, they'd created a new company, and men who knew the Lode prophesied that this time John Mackay was wrong.

"We're getting ready to start work again," Mackay was explaining in his slow, quiet, precise way. "The way I figure it, you have n n nothing to l-l-lose and perhaps something to g g gain. All I can promise is that your mine will be explored, which is s s something you c-c-can't afford to do yourself."

"And the plan?"

"S-s-strictly business. I figure we can add your property to our footage on the Lode and give you three hundred shares in exchange. It will p-p-probably never yield you a cent, but if so, you're no worse off than you are now."

Malcolm smiled, and then said, "That's it, John. But the answer is No."

"Why?"

"You're going to have to levy assessments to raise the money for your work. I haven't any money. I wouldn't be able to pay the assessments on three shares, let alone three hundred."

"Is that your only reason?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"No." Mackay's face flushed slightly. He said awkwardly: "I knew,

of course, that you had n-n-no money. Your property could be valuable to us. I would like to take care of your assessments as a personal loan. You c-c-can pay it back if we're lucky. Otherwise, you owe me nothing."

"It's a nice offer, John, but the answer is still No. I believe you understand why."

Mackay rapped his knuckles on the table "Malcolm Douglas," he said, "you're a damned fool. I'd be g g glad to make the same offer to anyone else who owned that mine. We need it."

Malcolm said, "I don't believe you "

"Very well. I'm asking it as a f i favor then I'd feel better." Mackay's rare, sunny smile burst through for an instant. "Why don't you stop being s s such a gentleman, Malcolm? I'd be risking very little more than I'd be compelled to invest, anyway."

Malcolm said, "You understand that if Consolidated Virginia fails to hit bonanza, you'll never get your money back?"

"I understand "

"I'll accept, then, under one condition. If the venture fails, you will let the assessment money stand as a personal loan. It'll come back to you in dribblets, but some day, somehow, I'll repay it "

Mackay started to protest, then thought better of it. He said, "If that's the way you want it, Malcolm "

"That's the way I want it "

Mackay extended his hand "Welcome to Consolidated Virginia," he said. "Here's luck to both of us "

Mackay, always the enthusiast, started explaining the plans of the company. In his eagerness he stumbled more than usual in his speech, but he made his points clearly.

The ambitious plan of the new company, he explained, was to sink a 1,500 foot shaft, at which point it was expected to intersect the Lode on its easterly dip. For two years desultory work had been done on the new shaft, but with discouraging results.

At the 500 foot level, Mackay and his associates sensed that something was wrong with their scheme. The Lode, which was a thousand feet wide at the surface, grew narrower as it became deeper and seemed certain to pinch out at approximately 900 feet.

"So," explained Mackay, "we've decided to drive a 900-foot cross-cut west to the Lode. We're extending long drifts both north and s-s-south. I'll admit that we're not much encouraged. So far we've hit barren quartz and porphyry. You know that recently our shares were down to almost nothing. I think our stockholders have invested about \$1,000,000 without any return "

Malcolm said: "Why do you keep on with it? What's the sense of throwing good money after bad?"

"What's the sense of mining at all, Malcolm? A man has got to take chances. Look what's happened at Crown Point and Belcher. I s-s-suppose you're familiar with that."

Malcolm said, Yes, he was familiar with it. It was the latest, the newest, the only current bonanza. It had come unexpectedly, and its geological significance had been overshadowed by the great stock battle at the conclusion of which John P. Jones and Alvinza Hayward owned the Crown Point and the Bank crowd emerged in possession of the Belcher. There was bitterness between them because Sharon and his associates had considered Jones and Hayward their friends. It was a new experience for Sharon to be double-crossed by someone he trusted; it was the first time he realized that for years he had been swinging a two edged sword, one which could injure him as well as an opponent.

The new bonanza, Mackay explained, was an ideal ore body. It was fairly uniform in value, easily mined and amazingly free from base metals. Unlike other major ore bodies, it lay on the footwall of the Lode, which at that point had a dip of about forty degrees. The ore, according to official report, extended from the 900- to the 1,500-foot levels in both Crown Point and Belcher, and was richest at the 1,300-foot level, where it achieved a length of 775 feet, and, in the Belcher, a width of 120 feet.

Malcolm said, "I understand all that, John, but those mines are at the other end of the Lode from Consolidated Virginia."

"There's no reason for us to be optimistic. is that what you're trying to s-s-say?" Mackay was amused. "That is logical, except that there's nothing logical about silver mining. We work, we win, we lose, but we always try. All we've got is a g-g-good mining gamble. So don't raise your hopes, my boy, don't ever raise your hopes on this or any other venture."

Malcolm listened for two hours. Much of what John Mackay explained was unintelligible, but it combined to bring him a sense of excitement, of being on the brink of discovery. Now he was about to become the owner of three hundred shares in a major enterprise. Win or lose, it was a definite, affirmative gesture.

He went to the mansion for dinner, buoyed by a sense of exaltation. He wasn't going to talk about the venture; he wasn't going to let anyone—not even John Mackay—know that he was excited and optimistic.

He walked into the house and was greeted by Logan Berkeley and

Althea. Logan nodded and said, "Hello, Malcolm," and Malcolm said coolly, "Hello, Logan."

It was Althea who broke the news. Her eyes were too bright, her voice too gay, too brittle. "We finally sold the house next door," she told Malcolm. "Logan and I have come back here to live."

Malcolm turned away. He didn't want Althea to see his face. She might read his thoughts, and he wanted to keep those to himself. But, in spite of everything, he felt a sense of impending triumph. Logan had failed, while he, Malcolm Douglas, might just possibly be on the threshold of success.

Malcolm encountered Mom at the head of the stairway. He grinned at her and gestured toward the parlor. "One big happy family again," he said.

Mom smiled enigmatically and said "You're right, Malcolm. So happy it hurts."

XLVI

YOU COULD TALK to Mom, watch Mom, go to her for help or for advice. But you could never know what she was thinking.

Her husband was the least of her worries. The Professor was happy anywhere and under all conditions. If times were good, he splurged; if times were bad, he accepted the buffeting with equal good nature. He was the unquenchable optimist, the person for whom the future was always brighter than the present, the paunchy, pudgy little man who had never really grown up. No, Brutus would never worry her, as long as he kept his robust health. But Althea . . .

Mom had known that Althea and Malcolm had been in love with each other in the early days on the Comstock, and she had known the day—almost the hour—when Althea began her campaign to marry Logan Berkeley. She knew that Althea was utterly different from either of her parents, that she was cold and hard and calculating, and that her appearance of warmth and generosity was a veneer. Oddly enough, Mom did not condemn Althea for feeling and acting as she did. She found her daughter's actions less than admirable, but entirely sensible.

Two weeks had elapsed since Logan completed the sale of his home and moved back into the mansion with Althea. He was proud of his little wife and of the way she was taking their misfortune.

She didn't complain, didn't nag, didn't quarrel. She was a realist was Althea, and it was sheer common sense to accept with outward passiveness the new turn of events. But Mom knew what was going on behind the laughing eyes of her daughter; she knew that Althea's ambition had intensified and not lessened, that she had mentally relinquished only temporarily all the things she had so recently possessed.

Things had been shuffled around considerably since the troupe had unloaded their wagons in front of the O'Mara mansion. There had been more shuffling necessary recently when Logan and Althea announced that they wanted to move in.

Heinrich and Heide Kramer were still working at the International Hotel, and they had prevailed on the management to provide each of them with a small room. Now Logan and Althea occupied the front corner room across the hall from Mom and the Professor, the room next to Malcolm Douglas. Mom would have changed that arrangement if it had been possible to do so. She was an intensely practical person, and she knew that, although the house was stanchly constructed, the walls were not soundproof, and she felt that it might have been more desirable to have had Malcolm farther removed from the bedroom of the girl he still loved and the husband to whom she was still married.

Then, too, there was the little matter of Deborah Cortland, who occupied the big room in one of the rear corners of the mansion, the room which originally had been shared by Althea and Barbara Hamilton.

Mom was genuinely fond of the slim, dark, pretty girl who had come alone from New York to prove that any convention may be defied provided one's defiance is calm and courageous and matter-of-fact rather than blatant. That Deborah was in love with Malcolm was so apparent to Mom that it didn't even warrant debate; what she couldn't quite evaluate, however, was the way Malcolm felt toward Miss Cortland.

There were times, many, many times, when Mom was ready to swear that Malcolm was in love with the girl, more deeply in love than he had ever been with Althea, yet it was during the moments when that belief was strongest that Mom was most worried. If Deborah were in love with Malcolm and if he loved her, what was holding them apart? Not Deborah, surely. The answer was Malcolm, and the reason for that answer was of deep concern to Mom.

Mom looked down at the embroidery she was doing. Mighty complicated pattern, she thought, but not nearly so complicated as the pattern of life in the O'Mara house.

There were things about Logan Berkeley which Malcolm never had understood and which he despaired of understanding. manifestations of character which fitted no preconceived ideas, no formal rules of conduct.

Logan took adversity with a smile because he saw no reason why he shouldn't smile. He could no longer afford the things he'd recently been able to afford, but that didn't seem to affect him. Malcolm knew that his one vulnerable spot might have been Althea; but Althea was accepting their misfortune smilingly, and there seemed to be no reason for Logan to mope.

And then there came the night in the middle of the summer of 1871 when Logan entered the house fairly bursting with enthusiasm. He walked in just before the dinner hour when they were all waiting in the parlor for the summons to the dining room.

Logan counted heads, and yelled for Mom. She came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Logan leaped across the room and hugged her.

"News!" he exulted. "Great news!"

Malcolm's lips compressed into a thin straight line. For a moment he thought that by one of those miracles which made the Comstock what it was, a new bonanza had been hit in the Rattlesnake. But it wasn't that at all.

Logan struck a pose, and made an elaborate bow. "Today I landed it," he announced gleefully. "You may all bow down before the new assistant foreman of the Chollar Potosi."

No one, save possibly Malcolm, knew just what that meant, but Logan's pride was infectious and the boarders all broke out into a clatter of congratulations. Even Gregory Drake, who was chronically dour and silent, said, "The assistant foreman, eh?"

Logan shrugged apologetically. "I wouldn't say *the* assistant foreman," he corrected. "I'm one of the assistants. A very minor one. Isaac Requa, the superintendent, told me he believed I would prove equal to the work."

Something, reflected Malcolm, was wrong somewhere. Why should Logan Berkeley be elated over a job as an assistant foreman, a sort of exalted laborer? The salary would be small, the prestige slight, the chances for advancement slim. Malcolm felt that he should be contemptuous of Logan's elation over his meager job, that he should regard it as a breakdown of the man's standards. But somehow it didn't work that way.

He looked at Deborah Cortland. Her eyes were shining with genuine enthusiasm. Malcolm couldn't understand that either.

Then he glanced at Althea, studied her.

She was praising Logan extravagantly; she was enthusiastic and radiant; she was everything he could have desired his wife to be. But once she looked directly at Malcolm, and he saw that her eyes did not reflect the enthusiasm of her smile or her speech. He saw a puzzled light in her eyes, as though she, too, wondered what manner of milestone this might be.

It was then that Malcolm knew—with a deep sense of satisfaction—that her enthusiasm was not genuine, that she accepted the present but was wondering about the future.

Malcolm felt better. He'd have felt perfect if he could have believed that Logan were less than sincere, or if he could even have understood Logan. But that was something he'd never been able to do. It was poor satisfaction, he thought, to see a man defeated if the man did not know he had been defeated.

The Chinese cook came in to announce that dinner was ready. Chattering, laughing, joking, as though at a party, they trooped into the dining room.

There was no mistaking that the guest of honor was Mr. Logan Berkeley, onetime landowner, onetime mineowner, but now elevated to the post of an assistant foreman at the Chollar-Potosi.

XLVII

IT CAME SUDDENLY and without warning, as all great drama usually comes.

The brief, parched summer was repeating before the first windy onslaughts of a chilly fall which rejoined another of the rugged winters. A man rushed into the office of the *Enterprise* and talked excitedly to Joe Goodman. Joe called Dan De Quille. A few minutes later Dan, his expression more somber, more sad than usual, walked over to the desk where Malcolm Douglas was working.

"Trouble," he said in his mild, apologetic manner.

"What sort of trouble?" Malcolm's mind leaped to the only sort of trouble that really rated attention in Virginia City. "Mine disaster?"

"No," answered Dan, "Murder."

Malcolm waited. Though Virginia City wasn't particularly law-abiding, murder was infrequent; nevertheless, human life was cheap, and it was not like Dan De Quille to be concerned about it—unless of course, it involved someone of importance.

"Who?" asked Malcolm.

"Someone you know. Gregory Drake."

"Good God!" Malcolm's brain worked fast. "He didn't kill Manny Hirsch?"

"The other way around. Drake caught his wife in bed with Hirsch. Manny killed him."

Wrong. All wrong. Erring wife, outraged husband, other man. The pattern was that the husband should have killed the other man, and the wife, too, if he felt so inclined.

"I'm going down there," said Dan. "Figured you might want to come along."

They left the office and turned down the hill toward the cheap hotel in the lower town where Manny had been living since he'd left the mansion. Dan said, "You knew there was an affair, didn't you, Malcolm?"

"I didn't *know*. I guessed, of course. Manny and Marcella were deeply in love. They've wanted to get married for a long time. Gregory Drake was a son of a bitch. He refused to give Marcella her freedom. Not that he wouldn't like to be free, but he's mean. Used to beat her. I had the room right across the hall from them: I could hear."

Dan said, "Just the same, Malcolm, Marcella was his wife, and if she's been having an affair with Manny . . ."

Malcolm made an impatient gesture. "I know. I know. In theory there can never be justification for anything like that. A woman must sleep with her husband even though she hates him, even though he beats her. She must stay away from the man she loves because the husband arbitrarily refuses to set her free. Damn it! I don't see it that way. It may be law, but it isn't justice."

De Quille looked down at Malcolm and smiled. "You'd have made a good lawyer, Malcolm. Why don't you handle Manny's case for him?"

"I've never passed a bar examination."

"Things are pretty informal around here. If you stated that you were doing it as a friend, without any fee, I don't believe anyone would object. As a matter of fact, we don't really have murder trials. Homicide cases seldom get any farther than the coroner's jury."

They turned in at the dingy hotel. The proprietor and his wife, a couple of miners, and a tall man whose immaculate raiment proclaimed him to be a professional gambler were in the miniature lobby. They were interested but not excited. Upstairs, at the rear of the second floor, they found a couple of policemen and a doctor. They identified themselves and walked into the room.

It was a barren, worn, shabby room, yet somehow they got the impression of neatness, as though Manny Hirsch had tried to convert it into a home. Except that now it didn't look homelike.

Manny was slumped in a chair near the window when Dan and Malcolm walked in. He looked up, recognized them, and hope showed briefly in his eyes. Then the look of horror, of disbelief, returned. As Malcolm watched, Manny closed his eyes as a man will do when he's in great pain, then passed his hand across his forehead. He looked small and shriveled and ridiculously harmless.

Marcella was seated in an old wicker rocking chair near the other window. She was bent over so that her face was in the palms of her hands, and she was crying softly and dreadfully. Her grief wasn't ostentatious, but it reached out and clutched you so that you knew it was genuine, and if you knew the story behind this tragedy you couldn't help feeling that her grief was bound to her fear for Manny Hirsch rather than for what was sprawled on the floor near the washstand.

The doctor was examining the body of Gregory Drake while the policemen looked on with mild interest. Drake was still wearing his heavy coat over his regular clothes, his hat was on the floor, his legs were stretched out stiffly and what had once been a white shirt was stained deep crimson.

The three officials recognized Dan De Quille, and Dan introduced Malcolm. Malcolm acknowledged the introductions and walked across to Manny. He dropped his hand on the puny shoulder of the man who had once been his roommate. He said, "Steady, Manny. Don't go to pieces." The eyes of the little man were raised gratefully, and he seemed to gather some strength from Malcolm. Malcolm deliberately made his questions crisp and businesslike.

"I'm going to look out for you, Manny. I've got to know two or three things. Did you actually kill him?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"A knife. One of the knives you used to throw. Remember when the show broke up you gave some of them to us as souvenirs? Well, I kept mine on the table yonder. . . ."

"Go ahead," prompted Malcolm.

"Gregory knocked on the door. I thought it might be someone with a message for me. I opened the door an inch or two, and he shoved in. He closed the door behind him. He had a pistol."

Malcolm looked across the room. One of the policemen was holding a pistol, so that part of Manny's story fitted.

"Gregory was very dramatic. . . ." Manny was fighting hard to

keep himself under control. "He said he was going to kill us both. And you know, Malcolm—it was odd, the feeling I got: that Gregory didn't care whether or not he killed me, but that he was glad of the chance to kill Marcella."

"Did he accuse her of infidelity?"

Manny's face flushed. "He didn't have to accuse her. We were in bed together."

"It wasn't the first time, was it?"

"It's been going on for a year. We were like married people. We wanted to be married. You know that's the truth."

"Of course I know. Now then: Gregory threatened her?"

"He was making a big scene of it, Malcolm, like a cheap comedian trying to play Hamlet. If he'd just shot, I wouldn't have been able to do anything, but he was dragging things out—torturing her. He said he was going to kill her first. He raised the pistol. He wasn't paying any attention to me. I grabbed the knife. He fired. He—"

"Just a minute. Did he fire before you grappled with him?"

"I think so. I'm not sure. I wasn't thinking clearly right then. I wasn't afraid, either. I stabbed him. He started to sag and the blood gushed out of his throat. . . ."

From across the room came the voice of the doctor explaining things to Dan De Quille: "Got him right through the jugular vein," he was saying.

"He fell down," finished Mannv Hirsch simply. "There was lots of blood. Two men rushed into the room. They told me, he was dead."

Malcolm went to Marcella. He took her hands in his. They were icy. He said quietly, "Look at me, Marcella."

She looked up. She wasn't sobbing now, but the tears were still running down her cheeks.

"Things are going to be all right, Marcella. One way or another I'll see that they are. Manny did the correct thing. It was the only thing he could do. He did it because he loves you. If you love him, you've got to steady yourself. He'll need your help."

She nodded and said she'd try. Malcolm went back to the policemen and the doctor and told them what he'd learned. They nodded and one of the policemen said: "That's what he told us. I guess it's true, all right. The pistol had been fired."

"Then what Hirsch did was self-defense."

"Wa-a-al, I wouldn't exactly say that, Douglas. After all, this woman was the wife of Gregory Drake. Seems like if she was sleepin' with another man, he had a right to kill her. And him, too, if he wanted to."

Malcolm explained briefly about the situation which had led to the tragedy. The policeman shrugged. "I ain't sayin' it ain't so, mister. Point is, can you make a jury see it the way you do? This man," nodding at what had been Gregory Drake, "was maybe all the kind of bastard you say. But you got to make other folks believe it; otherwise they only remember it was a husband which his wife was puttin' horns on him."

The doctor said he'd take Drake's body to the ramshackle building which did duty as coroner's office and morgue. He said he'd perform an autopsy, and there was a gleam in his eye that indicated he'd have fun doing it.

They took Manny Hirsch to the jail, and Dan De Quille went with them. He talked to the jailer and said Manny was a friend of his and also a friend of the newspaper's. The jailer was impressed. He promised that Manny would be kept by himself, that he would be given adequate protection if it was needed, and that if anyone wanted to send food or whisky in for the prisoner it would be all right with him.

Malcolm accompanied Marcella to the mansion. It was a long, difficult walk, and it was all uphill, up all the way from the nethermost depths of grief. He took her straight to her room and then called Mom. Briefly, he told her what had happened. Mom's expression did not change, but her clear blue eyes were warm with sympathy. She patted Malcolm on the shoulder, and entered Marcella's room.

Malcolm breathed a deep sigh of relief. He knew that Marcella would be all right now. Everything was always right when Mom took hold.

XLVIII

DAN DE QUILLE WROTE the story for the *Enterprise*. It was something less than sensational, and, while it did not evade the facts, it managed to soften the effect. The story appeared on page 3:

MAN KILLED IN FIGHT FATAL TERMINATION OF BATTLE IN LOWER TOWN

As the result of a fight between Gregory Drake and Emmanuel (Manny) Hirsch, both formerly members of Prof. Brutus Carmichael's Great Antiga-

mated Shows, known to all and sundry in Virginia City and Gold Hill, Drake's body is lying in the morgue, having been stabbed in the throat.

The fight started when Drake attempted to shoot Hirsch.

Hirsch is now in jail, awaiting the action of the coroner's jury.

Mrs. Marcella Drake, wife of the deceased, was a witness.

Malcolm Douglas was busy. First he had a conference with Dan De Quille and Joe Goodman. They sketched the job he had to do if Manny Hirsch was to obtain his freedom.

"You've got to bring all the witnesses you can find, Malcolm—character witnesses. You've got to make 'em testify over and over again about what a brute Gregory Drake was. You've got to make each man feel that he personally would like to have killed such a man. You've got to make them forget that Drake was a husband avenging a wrong."

Malcolm said: "But how can I do all that at an inquest? The law says—"

"Forget the law," advised Goodman. "Give 'em a show. That's what they like in Virginia City: a good show. The coroner will let you put up fifty witnesses if you want. It doesn't matter what the book says; you keep them interested and they'll thank you for it." After a while, the men on the jury will forget about Gregory Drake being a wronged husband: they'll only remember that he was a brute. They might even present Hirsch with a testimonial for doing a civic service."

Malcolm was not entirely convinced. He said he knew that the law—particularly criminal law—was loosely interpreted and casually applied in Virginia City, but scarcely to that extent.

De Quille laughed. "You haven't been around long enough, Malcolm. Now I'm not saying that murder isn't a pretty serious thing, especially when it's fatal, but that's elsewhere. Here, if a man dies, why, he's dead—and if he wasn't important when he was alive, he's less important when he's dead. All they ask now is some entertainment."

"Maybe you won't believe this, but it's Gospel truth. The year before you got here—maybe two years before—we had a sort of homicide epidemic. Got so you couldn't get a coroner's jury together. But we had a smart coroner. He knew what the public wanted. So for one inquest he selected for his jury all the one-legged men in town. Another time, he had for his six jurymen only fellers with one eye. Another time, in order to qualify, each jurymen had to show up with a canary bird in a cage. That was an awful funny trial, with them birds trying to outsing each other. Of course, the funniest was when he corralled a stuttering jury, and then egged them on

to do a lot of questioning. That went on a couple of days. Second day they had to move the inquest from the morgue to the court house."

"What about the defendant in each of those cases?"

"Them? Why, what would you think? The jury didn't hardly pay them any heed at all. They had their fun, enjoyed their show, and brought in verdicts of Not Guilty."

"This case is more serious, though, Dap."

"Sure. Folks here like to laugh and they like to cry. One's as good as the other, really. So you make 'em cry."

Malcolm took time off from the newspaper to prepare his case. He assembled his witnesses in the mansion the night before the inquest, and outlined his case. Believing in the majesty of the law, innately respecting it, he could not quite bring himself to believe that so serious a case could or would be decided on its entertainment value alone. But De Quille and Goodman had assured him that such was the truth; Brian Boru O'Mara was twice as sure.

And eventually, in a room which was packed to the doors, Emmanuel Hirsch, onetime banjo player and blackface comedian, faced the coroner and six good men and true who made no secret of the fact that they were enjoying the prominence which was briefly theirs.

Malcolm was allowed a free hand. After the State had established the identity of the deceased and the fact that he was completely dead, the show was turned over to Malcolm. He was nervous at first, but his nervousness vanished as the inquest proceeded. No matter how others regarded it, the inquest was deadly serious to him: he refused to take a favorable verdict for granted.

One by one he brought in his witnesses. He began with Brian Boru O'Mara, who was known and liked throughout Virginia City; he put the Professor on the stand, and was amazed that the coroner permitted the latter first to tell a couple of jokes and then to launch into a diatribe against the character of Gregory Drake.

Mom took the stand, then Logan Berkeley, then Althea. Heinrich and Heide Kravich testified with restraint and dignity. Barbara Hamilton was introduced as a former member of the troupe, a former boarder in the mansion, and as a widow of the Yellow Jacket fire, which was a subtle way of saying to the jurymen, "This girl who is now testifying is one of you."

By adroit questioning, by leading his witnesses, by taking advantage of all the leniency allowed him, Malcolm pounded and pounded on a single theme: that Gregory Drake, by inexcusable brutality, had forfeited his status as a husband.

He handled the case so that Gregory Drake was on trial, not

Manny Hirsch. He let the jurymen and the audience see Drake as a cruel, wife-beating, evil person whose death automatically made the world a better place. He made speeches to the jury between the testimony of witnesses, and he did everything which he had been taught could not be done in proper procedure.

It was a great show, although not at all according to what the books stated a coroner's inquest should be. By all the rules, the province of the coroner's jury was to determine by direct evidence whether the deceased had met death by violence in such manner as to warrant the trial of a specific person before a court of unlimited jurisdiction.

The case was nearing its end. Malcolm had used up all his ammunition; he had pounded the jurymen with emotion after emotion; and he was just about to launch into what, for want of a better description, might have been called a closing speech, when jurymen Number Two, a hulking miner with a large, droopy moustache, requested permission to ask Manny Hirsch a couple of questions.

It had been no part of Malcolm's plan to permit either Manny or Marcella to testify, but since the inquest had been a free-and-easy affair, and since the coroner had allowed him an absurd degree of latitude, he could not refuse.

He escorted Manny to the witness box and on the way whispered advice:

"Answer his questions as simply and honestly as possible. And don't worry."

"Your name is Manny Hirsch?" asked the juror.

"Yes."

"You used to be in the same theatrical company with this man Drake?"

"Yes."

"You and he had a fight in your room at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"He pulled a pistol and tried to shoot you?"

"Yes."

"Was that before or after you reached for the knife?"

"Before."

"Why did you grab the knife?"

"To save the life of Marcella Drake and also my own."

"Who is Marcella Drake?"

"She was Gregory Drake's wife."

"Where was she at the time?"

"In my room."

"Doing what?"

"We were—that is—" Manny's face turned red, and heidgeted uncomfortably.

"You and she had been to bed together, hadn't you?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't the first time, was it?"

"No."

"You know she was married?"

"Yes."

"You knew that this man was her husband?"

"Yes."

"That's all," said the burly juryman "Thank you."

The jury retired. Precisely eight minutes later they returned with their verdict. It was informally worded, but terribly conclusive. It was, ". . . that deceased was murdered by the said Emmanuel Hirsch, and we recommend that he be tried for said murder."

XLIX

MATHEW D. CLAYTON LEANED BACK in his chair and smiled across the cluttered desktop at Malcolm.

"I've been expecting you for a couple of days," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I heard about the show you put on at the inquest, and about the verdict. I knew you wouldn't let the matter drop there. Eventually you'd have to consult me."

Malcolm said: "The verdict was a gross injustice. You know that as well as I do."

"Of course. But that has nothing to do with it. You did excellent work, but your thinking was wrong. You were beaten before you started."

"Why?"

"Because, my dear Malcolm—" Clayton's voice was high and thin and sardonic— "your knowledge of masculine psychology is limited, your viewpoint too restricted. You neglected to take into consideration an elementary fact: a highly important rule had been violated."

Malcolm said, "I don't quite follow you, Mathew. What do you mean by 'a highly important rule'?"

"A rule of conduct: a social rule. What you forgot, Malcolm, was

this: Every man on that jury is either married or has been married or expects some day to be married. One of the great privileges of matrimony, from the masculine standpoint, is that of taking the law into his own hands if his marital domain is invaded.

"That privilege has a corollary: A husband must not only be protected from the law if he kills the violator of his home; he must also be protected from that violator. The amorous gentleman who acts as a snake in the grass and despoils a wife forfeits his constitutional rights as far as that husband is concerned. He may have his fun, if he's careful, but he may not injure the husband even though the husband is a bastard and is attempting to kill him.

"Now I'm not asserting, my young, unsophisticated friend, that your hostile juryman figured all that out. He probably wasn't capable of figuring anything. What you were up against was his instinct. He needed to establish one fact, and one fact only: that a husband—any husband—had been killed by his wife's lover. It was as simple as two plus two. The answer had to be four; the verdict had to be 'Guilty.' He himself, and all other men, had to be protected against home-betrayers who might also be adept with lethal weapons.

"It so happened that only one of your six men bothered to make that point, but the minute he did you had lost the case. The 'Guilty' verdict was a certainty."

Malcolm slumped, mentally as well as physically. He said, "Then a jury of twelve men in a superior court will think the same way."

"Unquestionably."

"And they'll hang Manny Hirsch?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you said—Damn it! Mathew, quit talking in riddles. In one breath you tell me that Manny is doomed, and in the next you hold out hope. Which do you mean?"

"I mean," said Mathew D. Clayton easily, "that it all depends on how far you are willing to go."

Malcolm waited. He waited while Clayton selected a cigar, daintily clipped off the end, meticulously lighted it, and blew a thin, fragrant cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I can get him off," he said.

"How?"

"Bribery," came the quiet answer. "Corruption. You still have the mighty weapon of venality on your side, Malcolm, if you care to use it."

Malcolm said tensely: "I'm not going to fence with you, Mathew. You're much cleverer with words than I am. Why not explain what you mean so that I can understand."

"Very well. Men have principles, but the type of men who may possibly be involved in Manny Hirsch's next, and final, trial do not have principles which are unassailable. Briefly, they can be bought; or, putting it more clearly, the man who has charge of selecting the jury may be bought. For a lesser sum, the individual jurors he will select may also be bought. To make the result quite definite, the judge might well prove to be not above a touch of corruption. I suppose we have an honest judge or two around here, but if so I'm not acquainted with them. With \$5,000 I can just about guarantee you the acquittal of your friend. It all depends on whether Manny's life means that much to you."

"It isn't a question of that, Mathew. It's the amount. I haven't any such money. Furthermore, how soon would you have to have it?"

"It is not for me, Malcolm. My services will be absolutely free, which in itself is a departure. At any rate, let us say any time within the next two or three weeks. If you wish, I'll keep an eye on things, and make sure that they do not rush him into trial."

Malcolm was silent for a moment. Then he smashed his fist on the desk top. "It's a God-damned outrage," he burst out. "Oh! not you . . . but the fact that what you are telling me is probably the truth. It's a travesty on justice, an offense to decency."

Bribery. Corruption. Lying. Cheating. The end would justify the means. That, it appeared, was the law of the Comstock; that was the realistic approach to life—a direct approach unimpeded by elegant slogans and high-sounding phrases.

"The man who succeeds," Clayton was saying softly, "is never wrong. If he fails with honor, his failure is remembered long after his honor has been forgotten."

Malcolm went to the door and spoke from there. "I'm really grateful to you, Mathew. I'm going to do what I can to raise that money."

"For Manny Hirsch?"

"For myself." Malcolm's smile had become thin and mirthless, like a small imitation of Mathew Clayton's smile. "If your theory is right, if it works out, Manny Hirsch's freedom will be pleasant but incidental. What I'll get out of it will be my own freedom to go after what I want and to get it by whatever means are effective."

He closed the door and descended the dark, narrow stairway to C Street. He mingled with the crowd which jammed the narrow, wooden sidewalks.

For the first time in three years he felt that he belonged.

L

MALCOLM'S FIRST PROBLEM was to raise the money. He thought of a dozen schemes, and discarded all of them. Eventually, he reached the conclusion which he had sensed was inevitable. He went to the Hale & Norcross office and waited until John Mackay came up from the lower workings.

It was a musty, crowded little place in a musty, crowded little frame building. There was a mill nearby, thundering incessantly, and the throbbing of the hoists and the plaintive blasts of the whistles cut through the flimsy walls.

Malcolm said, "I'm here to ask a favor, John."

Mackay nodded as though to say that he had only to name it.

"When I first thought of coming here," Malcolm went on, "I figured I'd start off with a speech about not letting you be influenced by the episode which introduced us to each other. I changed my mind. You would know my words were empty, and I'd know that you knew it. I wouldn't be here at all if that thing hadn't happened. I'm taking advantage of it. It gives me no right to ask a favor, but it does give me the opportunity."

Mackay's lips expanded into the faintest semblance of a smile. He said, "I appreciate honesty, Malcolm."

"I need \$5,000. In cash. I have no security to offer. I know about the assessments which already have been levied on shareholders of Consolidated Virginia stock; the amount you have advanced to cover my assessments are more than the value of my shares. I'll sign the stock over to you personally if you wish—"

"I prefer to have you keep your shares."

"Thanks. About this other money: If you lend it to me, it will eventually be repaid. When, I don't know. It might take years."

"It's important that you have it?"

"Very." He hesitated a moment, then leaned forward. "I'm asking you to treat this confidentially, John. If my purpose were generally known, it would defeat itself." He told, simply and graphically, the story of Manny Hirsch, of the adverse finding of the coroner's jury, of the necessity for a regular trial, and of his plan to influence the due processes of law by bribery.

John Mackay listened calmly. His expression was inscrutable, showing neither approval nor disapproval. After a silence of several mo-

ments he said, in his characteristic slow, careful way. "This man Hirsch is a great friend of yours?"

"A friend, yes. Nothing more than that. I happen to know the facts in this case. I can take a highly moral attitude, and by doing so let Manny be convicted and hanged. Or I can play corruptly with a corrupt system and obtain for him the freedom he's entitled to. You probably disapprove."

Mackay shook his head. "I neither approve nor disapprove," he said slowly. "Handled right, this plan of yours can work. I've never seen it applied to a c-criminal c-c-case before, but there's been t-t-too much of it in our civil cases." He held Malcolm's eyes and hurled his next question hard. "Do you feel that you are competent to negotiate this thing?"

"No."

"You have expert assistance?"

"Yes."

Mackay smiled again. "Mathew Clayton is shrewd," he said.

Malcolm stiffened. "What made you think it would be Clayton?"

"I know you know him. He'd be your logical choice." His voice was gentle. "I don't like Clayton's morals, but I respect his ability. He's a more able man than Sharon. He'd never have been tricked on the Crown Point deal as Sharon was tricked, because Mathew Clayton wouldn't even trust his friends, which was the mistake Sharon made. Yes, if Clayton says he can ac-a- accomplish this for you, he can."

"And?"

"I'll be glad to let you have the \$5,000. I may not admire your methods, but I do applaud your motives. Friendship is a rare thing these days and in this city."

They went together to the Bank of California, where Mackay withdrew \$5,000 in gold. It was given to him in a little canvas sack, and he did not turn it over to Malcolm until they were back in the Hale & Norcross office.

"I'll sign a note," said Malcolm.

"No need. Your note would be no better than your word."

Malcolm got up to go, and Mackay followed him to the door. "Now that the ice has been broken," he said, "why shouldn't we have d-d-dinner together occasionally?"

"Haven't I imposed on you enough?"

"No." Mackay shook his head. "I'm a rather lonely man."

They looked at each other with new understanding and new respect. Malcolm said, "I hope I'll be able to repay all this out of Consolidated Virginia profits. And I will have dinner with you—any time you say."

He went immediately to the office of Mathew Clayton. Clayton's eyes twinkled as he saw the canvas bag in Malcolm's hand.

"You have unexpected powers of persuasion, my boy," he said.

"How did you influence John Mackay to give you the money?"

"What made you think of Mackay?"

"It wasn't clairvoyance, Malcolm. I saw you leaving the bank together. Mackay was carrying a canvas sack which looked exactly the size and weight as the one you have there. Simple, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure. How is it you're always at the right place at the right time?"

"You might say that's one of the important things about becoming a success on the Comstock. That, plus an absence of scruples, and a profound instinct for self-protection."

Malcolm placed the bag of gold on the desk and watched Clayton tuck it away in his elaborate iron safe. "It won't be there long," he promised. "I believe I can assure you that your friend will have been tried and acquitted within two weeks."

Ten days later Mathew Clayton informed Malcolm that the trial date was set. He said: "Barring something unforeseen, Malcolm, you've nothing to worry about. You will find a friendly judge and jury; you will observe that the prosecution will be loud but ineffectual."

"Shall I continue to represent him?"

"Of course. Do what you did before, which was to put Gregory Drake on trial. But don't drag it out too far."

The big room in the Storey County Court House on B Street was not too crowded on the day of the trial. The judge was amiable, the prosecuting attorney hostile, save for a significant wink he gave Malcolm when he was sure that it would not be noticed.

It was a repetition of the inquest except that it was conducted with greater dignity. The State set up its case adequately but not powerfully. Unless you were observant, you would never have noticed that not too much stress was laid on the theme of the sanctity of the home, neither then nor later, when the prosecuting attorney was summing up.

Malcolm's parade of witnesses stressed the things he wished to have stressed. Before they had completed their testimony, Gregory Drake once more had been presented as a most undesirable fellow indeed. There were no questions from the jurymen; they were more bored than interested.

The judge's charge was brief, pointed, and biased. He gave the usual instructions about the legal aspects and reminded the twelve

good men and true that they were not to be influenced by the thing popularly referred to as the unwritten law. He said there was no unwritten law. He directed that this case be considered on its merits, and reminded them that a man has the right to protect his life by whatever means are available. He virtually instructed them to bring in a verdict of Not Guilty.

And that was precisely what they did. The jury was duly polled, and each man stated that he had arrived at his verdict of acquittal of his own free will. No mention was made of any gold payments. It was all quite proper and legal in form; the trial record was unassailable. Mr. Emmanuel Hirsch, who in simple justice should never have been in danger, had been saved from the gallows by the prompt and expert distribution of money.

Manny, who had not known that the scales of justice had been weighted in his favor with gold, was crying when Malcolm reached him. Marcella was crying, too. They announced that they intended to marry soon, and to leave Virginia City. It didn't matter where they went as long as it was somewhere else.

Everyone showered Malcolm with congratulations. Logan and Althea, who had been impressive witnesses, were there. Logan shook Malcolm's hand and declared that he had been wonderful. Malcolm escaped from him as quickly as possible and was confronted, just outside the building, by Deborah Cortland. He started down the hill and she fell into step beside him.

"You won't tell me how you did it, will you, Malcolm?" she asked.

"It was simple justice."

"Justice, yes. I agree with that. But it wasn't simple, Malcolm, not simple at all."

A hot resentment surged through him. He sharply demanded an explanation.

"Very well," she said coolly, "here it is: I watched you. You weren't worried. You had every reason to anticipate a conviction but you didn't. The prosecuting attorney was quite clever, but not in the way he was supposed to be. No jury could have returned a 'Guilty' verdict on the way that case was presented. So I ask you again: How did you do it?"

He answered slowly, without looking at her: "Isn't it enough, Deborah, to know that it was done? Isn't it enough to know that Manny was entitled to be free and that he is free? Can anything be more important than results?"

She said, "I'll ask you, Malcolm: Can they?"

He looked at her angrily. He said, "You're always probing, always looking for things that aren't there. . . ."

"Always asking questions you don't dare to answer, is that what you mean? I apologize to you, you gallant son of the chivalrous South. And I have an odd, disturbing feeling that the victory you have just won will prove to be only the first of many. I feel that you will win and win and win—and that, in the process, you will lose yourself."

LI

FROM THE MOMENT of Manny Hirsch's acquittal, Malcolm Douglas was a dedicated person. He no longer feared to face himself.

He had built up a great admiration for John P. Jones, onetime compliant superintendent of Sharon's Crown Point mine, and for Jones' associate, Alvinza Hayward. They had taken advantage of the trust placed in them by the Bank crowd to grab the Crown Point. They had profited enormously by the subsequent bonanza. Of course, the Bank crowd profited too, because the Belcher, adjoining Crown Point, struck an even greater bonanza; but Malcolm knew that every ton of rich ore taken from the slopes of the Crown Point was gall and wormwood to the Bank crowd. That ore would be converted into dollars which would find their way into the pockets of Messrs. Jones and Hayward when it rightfully belonged to Sharon and his associates.

And then, early in 1872, the ambitious and irrepressible Jones & Hayward launched their spectacular deal in Savage stock.

The Savage was a mine which lay between Gould & Curry and Hale & Norcross. Though it had known more productive times, it had recently been in borrasca. During 1871 Jones and Hayward had purchased it from Sharon in order to get enough ore to keep their mills busy, the mill themselves being a new and expensive acquisition.

Jones was the practical mining man, Hayward the financial genius who manipulated the stock in San Francisco. They staged their coup with daring and brilliance. Their bid for a new fortune was based not at all upon the actual value of the silver and gold in the Savage, but in what the public could be made to believe was there. As always, in such transactions, the public would make the ultimate payment, suffer the ultimate loss.

At the end of January, Savage stock was listed at \$6½ a share, and

nobody was particularly interested in it. On an agreed date both Jones and Hayward swung into action, the former in Virginia City, the latter in San Francisco.

Hayward ostentatiously issued to his brokers an unlimited order to buy Savage. A large proportion of gullible investors fell in behind him. The ones who considered themselves more astute got in touch with Virginia City.

They learned that all the miners at the Savage had been confined. They lived in the Savage offices, worked their shifts, and were permitted to have no direct contact with anyone on the outside. Guards were posted, and the public was allowed nowhere near the works.

This was a new operation for Malcolm. He queried Mathew Clayton about it. The dapper little man shrugged and spread his fingers.

"Everyone is entitled to a guess," he said. "Either they have hit a bonanza or they are trying to make the public believe they have. My guess is the latter. Practically all Comstocks will go up, even the worthless ones. I won't try to hold for the peak. I'll sell and pocket my profits. Watch the market closely, Malcolm; you'll find it interesting and instructive."

Clayton had prophesied accurately. The investing public, frenzied with new prospects of fabulous wealth easily acquired, rushed into the market. Savage, which was \$62 on February 1, 1872, skyrocketed to \$310 a week later, dropped back to \$230 within another three weeks, and then really started up. On April 17th it reached \$460 a share, and a week after that it attained a peak of \$725. Clayton and Malcolm Douglas had a couple of drinks together at the Crystal.

"I bought Savage at \$64," said Clayton. "I sold at \$510. I could have made another \$215 per share, but I'm not greedy. At \$510 the stock had exceeded any possible worth. At the present price it's in the realm of fantasy."

Malcolm was figuring with pencil and paper. He looked up from his totals and nodded. "I see what you mean," he said. "At today's price Savage is selling for \$12,500,000."

"Now you're beginning to see things, my boy," Clayton beamed with the pride of a teacher whose prize pupil is showing unexpected aptitude. "Savage is selling for more than the combined worth of Crown Point and Belcher, where there are known bonanzas. We don't know whether Savage has uncovered a dollar of new ore. We don't have to know. We merely know that important people want the public to believe that the stock is valuable. The higher the price, the greater the excitement. They'll spend the last penny of their savings to buy on a rising market, and they'll never sell until the market crashes."

"What continues to astound me," Malcolm observed, "is that the market apparently has no relation to the condition of the mines."

"That's it. Look what's happening to Crown Point and Belcher. No new information about either of them, except that Savage stock is booming and the rush is on. Crown Point was" —Clayton consulted a notebook he took from an inside pocket— "was \$770 in mid-March; on April 17th it reached \$1,250. Today, May 5th, it's selling at \$1,825 per share. Belcher reached a peak of \$1,525." Clayton produced a newspaper clipping and passed it over to Malcolm.

"Read that," he suggested. "It's from the *San Francisco Bulletin*."

The excitement in mining stocks and mining claims during the past few months has been without precedent in the history of our mines. Mining incorporations have been multiplying like the leaves of autumn. The capital of existing corporations has been increased in the most lavish manner. Prices have gone up like a rocket, and in some cases have reached altitudes never dreamed of by even the most enthusiastic. Yet it is noteworthy that out of 150 stocks offered to the public through the stock boards, *only four are paying dividends*

Malcolm folded the clipping, handed it back, and said, "That's incredible."

Clayton said "Nothing is incredible, Malcolm. I'll give you a new fact to digest. What would you say if I told you that of the four dividend-paying mines mentioned in that article, only two are on the Comstock: Belcher and Crown Point. The others are at Pioche."

"I begin to see . . . I suppose if one could spin a coin several times a day, heads or tails, and if enough newspaper space were given, enough speculation on whether it was most likely to fall one way or the other on the next spin, you'd have the public flocking in with its money. Is that what you're trying to show me?"

"Partly." Mathew Clayton was never happier than when displaying his shrewdness to his young disciple. "Where your coin spinning analogy falls down is that there would be no prospect of stupendous profit. You could win no more than even money on each toss of the coin. Each person who buys mining stocks expects to become a millionaire. That's why they never sell until it's too late."

Clayton prophesied the inevitable crash from the fantastic, unrealistic heights reached by the leading stocks. It had to be, he said, and pointed out the fact that the stock market value of all listed mining stocks in January had been \$17,000,000 and that on May 5th the value was \$81,000,000. That meant, he explained, that \$64,000,000 of outside capital had been entrapped by a spectacular maneuver, \$64,000,000 which would find its way snugly into the pockets of the insiders who artificially had created the boom, who had known that

there was no bonanza in Savage, and who had gambled only to the extent of getting the orgy started.

The crash, when it came, was accompanied by drama and bitter personal invective. William Sharon and John P. Jones were campaigning against each other for a seat in the Senate of the United States. Sharon, himself one of the most brilliant and unscrupulous of manipulators, donned a robe of righteousness and accused Jones of deliberately manipulating the market. He followed that with the sensational statement that Jones, the hero of the Yellow Jacket fire in 1869, had himself set the fire in order to break the market. San Franciscans became violently partisan because their investment funds were endangered; denizens of the Comstock let their feelings run high for the same reason, plus the fact that they had definite personal feelings about the rival candidates.

But what impressed Malcolm was the fact that there was no concerted bitterness against the men who had engineered the colossal hoax and enriched themselves by more than \$50,000,000. Fact had played no part in the spectacular boom and subsequent crash; truth had been ignored or forgotten. The consensus of opinion was that Jones and Hayward had been smart, that they had lived up to the finest traditions of the Comstock. And even those who had been hit heavily clung to their optimistic belief that actually there must be new wealth in the lower levels of the big mines. The crash, therefore, was not complete, the stocks dropped to a closer approximation of their values, but they still remained high. The little investors had been squeezed dry, but there was enough new money to cushion the drop.

Those were great days in Virginia City and Gold Hill. To mining and speculation, which had always been the only topics of conversation, had now been added the new excitement of a fierce political battle. John P. Jones, who twice had prevailed against the almost unbeatable Sharon financially, was now battling him for political honor. Invective swept through the streets and the bars of Virginia City; money was spent liberally; personal animosities were fanned into new flame by political discussion; and during the final weeks of the campaign sanguinary battles were frequent. The incumbent, Senator James N. Nye—a former governor of Nevada—was also a candidate but he attracted no attention. He was not spectacular, he did not indulge in picturesque vilification, and he had too little money to spend. You could admire Senator Nye, but you couldn't get drunk or his vote-buying money. It was different with Sharon and Jones.

During those weeks there was no trouble filling the four huge pages of the *Enterprise*. Political rallies, violent speeches, miniature

riots, noisy and colorful torchlight parades, shootings and cuttings, general drunkenness. It was a time of carnival, and even though you sat on the sidelines, aware of its absurdity, you could not escape the excitement.

Day and night Malcolm went where there was promise of interesting news. Several times he encountered Deborah Cortland. He joined her one night at a big, blatant rally where the rival candidates and their friends vilified each other from the same platform, and during the course of which several fights broke out and one man was fatally stabbed, although the principals contented themselves with invective.

She was seated below the speakers' stand, sketching busily. Malcolm said Hello, and watched her working, amazed afresh at the facility with which she managed to capture the feeling of what she was observing. He knew that later she would rework her sketches, but even in the midst of violence and excitement she worked with skill and concentration.

It was odd, reflected Malcolm, peering over her shoulder as she worked intently, unmindful of a free-for-all less than twenty feet away, indifferent to the profanity and bawdiness, steady and unafraid in the midst of all the belligerence, it was odd how intensely feminine she remained, and how dignified. Her acceptance, on her own terms, in this world of hard, rough men was a major miracle.

"You're never afraid, are you?" he asked.

She looked up briefly and said: "No. Why should I be?"

"You could get hurt, you know."

"I'm not afraid of any hurt I might get while I'm working."

She bent over her sketch pad again, ignoring him, and he looked down at her, wondering whether there had been a significance in her utterance that he was supposed to grasp.

From the beginning it seemed that Jones must win, but Malcolm's sympathy went out to Sharon, who was like a bantam rooster stalwartly battling a gamecock. He was without physical fear despite his lack of physical ability to defend himself. He was a fighter through and through, never recognizing that he could or would be defeated.

Jones was genial, and a born politician. He had come up from nothing, rising from practical pick-and-shovel mining to become a Comstock millionaire. In the mind of the average man, he personified hope; he was the man who actually had accomplished what every miner on the Comstock believed that he might do. He was big-bodied, with a long chin which enhanced his general air of benevolence. He shared, with John Mackay and Jim Fair, the distinction of being no different from the men among whom he worked.

Election eve was fantastic. Election day was even more so. Votes were not only openly solicited, but openly bought. There was no pretense that the election was being conducted honestly.

John P. Jones was elected to the Senate of the United States in January of 1873. The senatorial toga was thought to have cost him close to half a million dollars. William Sharon took his defeat with a wry smile. He said: "I'll join him in Washington someday. Meanwhile, one more opponent will have left the Comstock."

To Deborah, Malcolm said: "If Sharon says he'll go to the Senate some day, he will. I admire him."

"Why?"

"Because he's always fighting against impossible odds. He never quits. He's small physically, but he's unafraid. Though he knows that he is personally unpopular, and that he should therefore remain out of politics, he has announced that he will remain in the political arena. He accepts battle on the other man's terms."

"And you think he'll eventually win because he's more unscrupulous?"

Malcolm frowned. "Yes," he said sharply, "I think exactly that."

She said, "You're struggling to change yourself into something you are not. I don't know exactly what you hope to accomplish, Malcolm, or how you propose to accomplish it, but this I prophesy: If and when you do, you won't be happy."

"Tell me why."

"Because you're fighting a sense of your own inferiority. You'll never be able to escape that by continuing to be inferior."

He said angrily: "You talk in riddles. I don't even understand you."

She looked at him long and steadily.

"You will," she said. "Someday, I'm afraid, you'll understand. And then it will probably be too late."

LII

MALCOLM DOUGLAS DONNED heavy boots and his warmest clothes. Slowly, laboriously, he plowed through snowdrifts and battled the prevailing Washoe zephyr until he reached the summit of Mount Davidson.

From that bleak eminence he looked down upon the Washoe and

felt an inward excitement. Deliberately he cast aside his emotional and spiritual doubts: he couldn't be forever jousting with wraiths. He had not climbed the mountain for that purpose, but to establish clearly in his mind's eye a certain picture of the Comstock, to understand what was happening down below and why recently John Mackay and Jim Fair had seemed so optimistic. Fair, he understood, because Fair was a great blusterer, a man who boasted in superlatives. But Mackay . . .

During the recent days of the Crown Point-Belcher boom, all stocks had rocketed. Consolidated Virginia, of which Malcolm owned three hundred shares, had gone up, with all other stocks in the frenzy of speculation, to the unjustified price of \$150 a share. Malcolm had gone to John Mackay and offered to sell enough of his stock to wipe out his personal debt.

“Mackay had regarded him steadily, and shaken his head.

“I'm not worried about the m-m money you owe me,” he said, in his slow, gentle, careful way. “I think Consolidated Virginia has a big future. Hold on to your stock.”

The play and counterplay of the important owners astounded Malcolm. He had learned much about the chessplay and diplomacy of Comstock mining, but the pattern had not been as clear as he wished it to be.

There had been the matter of a strange agreement arrived at by William Sharon and his Bank crowd on the one hand, and the new and promising firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien on the other. Mackay and Fair had asked a favor of Sharon, and Sharon had smilingly granted it.

Malcolm knew nothing about geology except what he'd picked up since becoming a reporter for the *Enterprise*. He had come up to the top of the mountain, where the rugged contours of the Comstock were all visible to him, so that he could visualize what might have been in the mind of the lamb when he deliberately placed his head within the jaws of the lion. Because John Mackay was the lamb, and—in a modest, unobtrusive, unimportant way—Malcolm Douglas was his partner.

Prospecting the Lode, Mackay and Fair had planned to sink a shaft to the 1,100-foot level, below the old barren workings, and to extend a long drift south and west from the Ophir works. That idea had been abandoned in favor of a sinking of their own Consolidated Virginia shaft to the 1,000-foot mark in their search for the bonanza they felt must be hidden at those greater depths.

That plan, too, had been discarded. Mackay and Fair had then gone to William Sharon and requested permission to drift north and

west into Consolidated Virginia from the 1,167-foot level of the Gould & Curry shaft which was located 1,300 feet south of Consolidated Virginia. Sharon, who hated Mackay and Fair, and who controlled Gould & Curry, cheerfully gave the desired permission.

Looking down from above, Malcolm saw what Mackay and Fair had in mind; he also saw clearly why Sharon had granted permission. The operation was certain to prove expensive, and Sharon had said, after giving it, that he had done so in order to help his two arch enemies lose all the money they had made on the deal by which they took Hale & Norcross from him.

The mining area of the Washoe stretched straight north and south for a distance of about two miles. The Lode was halfway down the mountain. The upper workings of Consolidated Virginia had been exploited fruitlessly. By drifting from the 1,167 foot mark of the Gould & Curry, it was Mackay's hope to come into his own property far below the depth of any shaft he had yet sunk or could afford to sink.

Malcolm could see it now. To start the drift from a point farther downhill, instead of dropping the shaft from the surface, to cut horizontally into the mountain from the desired level and to branch out from there.

From where he stood in the snow and wind, Malcolm could see the Gould & Curry hoisting works just to the south of the center of Virginia City. A trifle north of that were the Best & Belcher works, and still farther north was the Consolidated Virginia property, that combination of small and apparently worthless mines totaling 1,310 feet of the Lode.

He visualized what was happening underground, as though drawing a plan in his mind. He could mentally look down to the 1,167-foot level and see the drift that the partners already had cut some 800 feet due north from the Gould & Curry, through the Best & Belcher property. He knew that the drift then turned northwesterly, which meant that it was now headed directly toward the Lode, and he had been electrified three months ago, by the announcement from John Mackay that 178 feet north of the Best & Belcher line the drift unexpectedly had crossed a fissure seven feet wide and filled with porphyry, clay, and quartz which assayed from \$7 to \$34 per ton.

Mackay and Fair confessed that they didn't quite know how to estimate this discovery. It wasn't where it was supposed to be, but there was one thing that they, as practical miners, did know, and that was that deposits of low-grade ore often led to rich ore bodies.

It was then that John Mackay decided upon a policy new to the Comstock: He determined to publicize an actual discovery, and to

keep the populace informed of its progress. He gave a statement to Malcolm, and Malcolm checked it with Dan De Quille before writing it, lest he be accused of connivance because of his interest in Consolidated Virginia.

On the preceding September 19th, just before the first day of the fall of 1872, the news of the discovery had been blazoned forth in the *Enterprise*:

Capt. Sam Curtis, present superintendent of Con. Virginia, is confident of finding good ore in the mine. He says that when it is properly opened it will prove to be one of the best mines in the Comstock.

Ever since that day Malcolm had experienced an inward excitement, an expectancy. He knew that a good portion of it was directly attributable to Dan De Quille. That tall, somber journalist, chronically conservative and restrained, had exploded with enthusiasm when the project was first explained to him. He dug back into the files of the *Enterprise* and proudly displayed to Malcolm a series of articles he had written five years previously. The articles had called attention to the 1,310 feet of the Lode right in the heart of Virginia City, and had insisted that a bonanza must exist there. He had urged a prospecting of that portion of the Lode.

"They'll hit a bonanza, Malcolm. Mark my words. It's got to be."

"Why, Dan?"

"Instinct, I suppose. I'm not a geologist, but neither is the average practical miner. Those are things you feel." He regarded Malcolm gravely. "You own three hundred shares of Con. Virginia?"

"Yes."

"Can you afford to hold it?" He was thinking of the heavy assessments being levied against the stockholders during the prospecting operations.

Malcolm said Yes, he could hold it.

"Then do it. It'll make you rich. Don't sell out the minute the stock starts to go up. Too many men have lost fortunes that way."

His enthusiasm, however little it was based on scientific knowledge, was contagious. For one thing, it was rare and out of character. De Quille had been witness to too many bitter disappointments. Had seen too many prospective bonanzas peter out in hopeless borasca, to be unduly influenced. It was plain that he believed implicitly in Consolidated Virginia, believed that there was wealth incalculable somewhere in that 1,310 feet, and his enthusiasm communicated itself to Malcolm.

Fair and Mackay worked shoulder to shoulder with Sam Curtis in directing the operations. Grimly, determinedly, doggedly, they continued to follow the fissure on its northeasterly course. True, it ap-

peared to be leading farther and farther away from the Lode, but the prospects were encouraging. The vein of low-grade ore increased in size until it attained a width of 48 feet at the end of the 280-foot northeast drift, and the 800 tons of rock brought to the surface in the process of drifting averaged \$23 per ton in mill returns. At that point work on the drift was stopped until the shaft could be dropped to the 1,200-foot level, which was equivalent to the 1,167-foot level of their starting point in the Gould & Curry shaft.

"Bonanza!" It was a magic word, a word that Malcolm had never before dared apply to himself.

If John Mackay was right, he'd be rich. The prospect was dazzling: to become wealthy through his Big Cypress property; to have seen Logan reduced from wealth to near poverty by the burning of the mine which Malcolm had believed should have been half his.

He was smiling as he started down the mountainside toward the ugly, noisy, congested town.

He had the feeling—it was strong and inescapable and intoxicating—that he was on the verge of achieving everything he wanted.

LIII

THERE WAS AN odd sense of excitement in the group which gathered at the shaft of the Gould & Curry early in the morning of March 1, 1873. The men stood patiently enough, but in their eyes shone the strange, fierce light of discoverers, of men selected to witness the fulfillment of fantastic hope or to see that hope destroyed.

James Graham Fair, his chronic boisterousness somewhat subdued by the importance of the occasion, had assumed charge while his senior partner, John Mackay, remained silent.

It was characteristic of Jim Fair to dominate any dramatic event in which he was a participant. In addition to being one of the finest practical miners ever to explore the Comstock, Fair had histrionic ability equaled by few of the paid performers ever to strut the boards at Piper's Opera House.

Fair was forty-two years of age, stocky, powerful, dynamic. He had black curly hair, dark skin and eyes, a luxurious beard and a rich, full voice inherited from parents in Dublin, Ireland. He was neither popular nor generous, but men admired his ability and his doggedness.

He struck a dramatic pose in front of the group of men preparing to descend the Gould & Curry shaft. Except for himself and John Mackay, these men were not miners. Of course Dan De Quille had had practical experience, but primarily he was a journalist. Certainly Malcolm Douglas knew nothing of mines, nor did the slender, wiry representative of the *Gold Hill News* who was included in the group.

There were a half-dozen others: newspaper men, stockholders, friends. They were all dressed in the conventional miners' garb: heavy boots, denim pants, woolen shirts, and shapeless felt hats. Each man carried a lantern.

"In a few minutes," orated Fair, "we'll be going down to the 1,167-foot level of this mine. After the cage stops, I advise every man of you to take off his shirt. You've heard descriptions of hell, but I'm telling you now that what you're running into is worse. Down where you're going there's boiling water and steam and gas; you're going to feel like you are strangling and boiling, all at the same time. But what you will see will justify everything."

"Today—this morning—we expect to cut into the greatest natural body of mineral wealth the world has ever known. You're going to see for yourselves ore that is so rich as to be almost solid silver—and most of what isn't silver is gold. You can believe what you see, or not believe it: it doesn't matter a damn to me. When you come back up, you can talk to anyone about it in any way you want. That also doesn't mean a thing to us. This is a mining venture—not a stock-market manipulation. Are there any questions?"

Dan De Quille's quiet voice spoke for the others. "How come, Jim," he asked mildly, "that you're expecting to hit it at the exact moment we go down? Why not yesterday or tomorrow?"

"Good question, Dan; damned good question. And the answer is good, too." He walked up and down in front of his audience, swinging his lantern. "I planned it this way, that's why. For months I personally have been leading a crew of picked men in their work on this drift. Time after time the vein of ore we've been following has almost pinched out. The men were discouraged; some of them were ready to quit. They'd had enough, they said, of killing themselves in that suffocating heat. They called me a fool. But I wasn't a fool. I knew what we were going to find, and within the past few days my confidence has been justified. The ore has gotten richer, the vein has increased in width. We've got charges of giant powder planted. They will be exploded after you get down there. The quartz will fall away and you will see all the wealth I have described, and more, exposed to your gaze. Jim Fair is staking his reputation on that."

Dan said, "This was all your idea, Jim?"

"My idea and my leadership."

"About Sam Curtis, your superintendent. Didn't he help at all?"

"Of course he helped. Every man helped. But they'd have gotten nowhere without a leader, without someone to drive them on. That someone was me."

De Quille said, "What has John Mackay been doing all this time?"

"He's mostly been supervising the drift we're running from the Con. Virginia to meet this drift. As my partner, he's been working hard too. But he hasn't been following a thread of ore like I have; he's just been tunneling."

Malcolm glanced at Mackay. The stocky, quiet man was saying nothing. He wore an expression of quiet amusement, of tolerance; he looked as a father might look when indulging the boastful utterances of a precocious but noisy child. Malcolm whispered to Mackay, "How much is he exaggerating, John?"

"Probably not at all. At least, I hope not. We have all the indications of the greatest of all bonanzas."

"This trip," Fair was continuing, "is not officially an inspection trip. Today we expect to uncover the ore body. It will take us a few days or weeks to expose its full possibilities. At that time some experts will be invited down to explore it at their leisure, to take whatever samples they want for assay, and to talk or write about it as they choose. And that goes particularly for you newspaper men, and especially Dan De Quille."

The whistle of the hoisting works shrilled imperiously. The double platform reached the surface, and at a signal from Jim Fair the guests clambered aboard. Fair signaled to the engineer, and the cage dropped with what seemed to Malcolm breath-taking speed, though actually the engineer was exhibiting unusual restraint.

By the time they stepped into the long dark gallery 1,167 feet below the surface, Malcolm had ceased to wonder at Fair's instruction to doff their shirts. The heat came at them like a great soggy blanket, so that they could scarcely breathe, and with it came also a noxious odor plus the menacing dampness of steam.

The air was still and foul; there was no circulation.

"Stand here until you get used to it," boomed Fair. "It's worse where we're going."

They moved slowly northward, a ghostly, single-file procession. Their lanterns cast eerie shadows on the rough clay and porphyry walls. Sounds were muffled, and their voices were deadened and unnatural.

This, reflected Malcolm, could be it; this could be the proper spin

of the wheel of fortune, the golden opportunity which comes once to some men and to most men, never. The excitement grew within him, tying up his stomach in a tight, painful knot so that it was a physical relief to walk in a slightly stooped position.

If there were a bonanza, if it were even a half, or a quarter as great as the bombastic Fair declared, then he, Malcolm Douglas, would have a sizable stake in a project which could not fail to make him modestly wealthy.

He could be important, influential, powerful in his own little world. He could make sure that Logan Berkeley understood that his wealth had come to him through the miserable little mine which Logan disdainfully had tossed to him as one throws a bare bone to a hungry dog. He would impress Althea, would make her regret the fact that she had cast him aside.

Althea would smile with her lips, but not with her eyes. He knew her; he knew what she'd be thinking. She had elected to marry a man who was temporarily wealthy, unmindful of the hurt she was inflicting on Malcolm, indifferent to the fact that he loved her and that he believed she had come as close to loving him as she could ever come to loving anybody. She'd see for herself that he had taken the abandoned mine for which Logan had had no more use, and converted it into a fortune; that he was now a rich man while Logan Berkeley was an obscure assistant foreman.

They lurched through the heat and steam and gas, pausing to gasp for breath, not daring to waste oxygen in conversation.

The drift grew higher and wider, and at length they came into a cavern in which, through the fogged, steamy air, they saw a score of men stripped to the waist, dripping with sweat, moving here and there in organized disorder under the calm direction of Captain Sam Curtis, their superintendent.

Jim Fair's voice was oddly muted by the heavy, stifling stillness.

"At this moment," he said, "you are standing 1,200 feet below the heart of Virginia City . . . almost directly below the International Hotel. Remember that in the future: The greatest of all Comstock strikes is about to be disclosed immediately below the city in which all of us live."

Sam Curtis conferred with Fair and Mackay and stated that the drilling had been done, the giant powder planted. The men crowded back into the tunnel. They crouched there, half-naked, sweating, tense, expectant, stifled, eager.

Then came the explosions. One. Two. Three. As though from a great distance. Muffled. Then a sound like that of a giant waterfall,

and then a hoarse cry from a hardy and leather-lunged assistant foreman, summoning them back into the great cavern.

The forward and side walls had collapsed. The appearance was of desolation in a tomb. All semblance of orderliness had vanished. Quartz, clay, porphyry, were piled in great heaps.

The men moved in, reaching for samples of the stuff which had been blasted loose. Excitement ran high; heat was forgotten; men ceased to realize that they had difficulty in breathing because breathing seemed an unimportant thing now.

Fair, gripped with an uncontrollable excitement, was pointing out something. "You see," he said, "the fissure continues to widen. It's getting bigger and bigger. This is just the beginning. Look at this!" He picked up a huge chunk. "God dam' near solid silver. Look at the gold in it. Millions! That's what lies just ahead. Millions and hundreds of millions!"

Malcolm ranged alongside John Mackay. "Is he still exaggerating?"

Mackay was no longer calm. His famous imperturbability had vanished; he, too, had been shaken by the potentialities of their discovery. "He's p-p-probably exaggerating," he said in a voice which was far from steady, "but not t-t-too much." His eyes blazed into Malcolm's. "I think, my boy," he said, "that if you hold onto y-y-your shares long enough, you will b-b-be a very rich man."

The party of visitors groped back through the drift toward the Gould & Curry. They no longer felt physical tiredness, although they were emotionally exhausted. Malcolm experienced a sense of exaltation beyond anything he had ever known. The unbelievable had happened. He wanted to be alone, to think, to enjoy his foretaste of triumph. All he needed was patience. The exploitation of the great bonanza was in the hands of the two best practical miners in the Comstock. Later he was to look back upon this fantastic two hours and say, "I was there when they uncovered the Big Bonanza—the greatest bonanza in the mining history of the world."

On the 2nd of March the *Virginia City Enterprise* and the *Gold Hill News* carried graphic stories of the discovery. The news was flashed to San Francisco and spread across all the front pages of that city's bonanza-conscious newspapers.

On the morning of March 2nd, Consolidated Virginia stock sold at \$40 per share. When the market closed, it was selling at \$80.

Malcolm Douglas, owning three hundred shares, had made \$12,000 in those few hours. And the surface of the Big Bonanza had not been scratched; its vast extent not even suspected.

Malcolm dined alone that night. He went to bed early, but sleep did not come.

He, Malcolm Douglass, had arrived on the Comstock less than five years ago: a knife thrower in a cheap medicine show, the owner of an abandoned mine which was hopelessly in borrasca.

Four and a half years, to be exact. The old Mexican adage returned to his mind: "As many days as you spend in borrasca, just that many days shall you be in bonanza."

LIV

News of the Consolidated Virginia bonanza tell somewhat short of driving the general public into a frenzy. The recent hoax in Savage was too fresh in the minds of investors; they were reluctant to toss new money after old. San Francisco speculators nodded knowingly: they were too wise to be caught again, too cunning to swallow another fairy tale of bonanza.

Consolidated Virginia stock rose slowly but steadily. James C. Flood, financial brain of the firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien, went about his daily tasks, refusing to comment on the amazingly optimistic reports he was receiving from Virginia City. But on the strength of those reports he continued to buy the stock unobtrusively. On May 20th the shares had risen to a market value of \$100, and Malcolm figured his gross worth at \$30,000, minus, of course, the \$5,000 he owed John Mackay for money which had been spent corrupting the court so that Manny Hirsch might have his freedom, and also the very considerable assessments which had been levied against his shares during the expensive drifting operations.

He had a brief consultation with John Mackay. That gentle-mannered, slow-talking, thoughtful individual smiled and shook his head when Malcolm broached the subject of selling. He said: "Hold on, Malcolm. Hold on for a long time. Prospects are getting better and better."

This bonanza was something to which the Comstock was not accustomed. There had been little fanfare above the surface, no blaring of bands and waving of banners, no effort to trick the investing public into buying Consolidated Virginia. The slow advance of the stock was not only based on tangible value, but was actually lagging far

behind that value. If San Francisco was skeptical, that was San Francisco's privilege; Virginia City knew better, and steadily there mounted in the Comstock the sense of expectancy, the excitement which had to accompany the discovery of a bonanza to outstrip all other bonanzas.

Mackay and Fair were indifferent to the market fluctuations. They said they were miners, not manipulators; they were probing deeper and deeper into Mount Davidson for silver and gold; they were intent on acquiring wealth by the production of precious metal, not by stock gambling.

Comstockians, who knew both men, were impressed. They were also impressed by the ill concealed fury of William Sharon, who, in the attempt to ruin the new firm, had made possible the discovery of the bonanza.

Sharon fretted in the knowledge that if Mackay and Fair had been compelled to stick to their original plan of sinking a shaft to the 1,000-foot level of the Consolidated Virginia and then driving a crosscut westward 600 feet to the Lode, they'd have missed the bonanza altogether and would have squandered more than \$200,000 in the enterprise. It was galling to realize now that even if the drift had been started from the 1,000 foot level of Sharon's Gould & Curry, it would have been a full 100 feet above the ceiling of the bonanza.

It had been Sharon who advised the partners to start their drift deeper than 1,000 feet, figuring that the deeper they worked, the more barren the ground would be, and the more quickly they would be reduced to bankruptcy. And so he had tricked them into starting precisely where they did start; he had tricked them into drifting straight into the greatest bonanza ever known. Working through Sharon's shaft, drifting under Sharon's property, protected by an agreement that even Sharon could not break, they found the cap rock of the great ore body 114 feet above the 1,200-foot level, which meant that had they drifted from 1,000 feet they would have missed the bonanza by at least 60 feet.

Sharon's discomfiture vastly amused the men of the Comstock. "That little pouter pigeon," stated one grizzled mine foreman who had been kicked out of two jobs by Sharon "when he heard what Mackay an' Fair had hit, he like to of bust a gut. An' that's what really makes me sure them fellers have got hold of somethin' big."

The excitement grew in Virginia City slowly and healthily. Every inch of progress was watched with fascinated interest; every ton of ore was scrutinized carefully; and efforts were made to learn its assay value.

Things were happening that were new to the region. No secrecy

was maintained; no workers were pledged to keep their mouths shut. Mackay and Fair made no effort to advertise what they had, nor did they attempt to fan the flame of public interest. That was the principal reason why the San Francisco investing public was so slow to fall into line and why the residents of the Comstock, being familiar with practical mining, were so enthralled by the slow, steady, daily improvement. It was like watching a magnificent dramatic performance which continued, not for a few hours, but for days and weeks and months.

For the first time since reaching Virginia City, Malcolm Douglas was happy. It seemed as though a benign Fate had arranged a pattern particularly for him. If the discovery blossomed into even a fraction of the expected bonanza, he'd be content. He spent his days in a continual glow; the future was tinted in rose and gold.

Everyone at the mansion knew that he owned three hundred shares of Consolidated Virginia, and they'd all been residents of the region long enough to suspect that this was no premature announcement of a bonanza that would fail to materialize. Perhaps more than anything else, the enthusiasm of Brian Boru O'Mara convinced them.

"When John Mackay says a thing is so, it's so," his great voice boomed across the dinner table. "And 'tis I, O'Mara, who will forget me distaste for Jim Fair and give him his due as a great mining man." He turned his good countenance upon Malcolm. "And you, me fine young buck—'twas a lucky day when your miserable property happened to be close enough to be included in Consolidated Virginia. The only thing that amazes me was how you had good sense enough to take shares for your mine instead of selling for a pittance of cash."

Malcolm smiled and answered O'Mara directly, although his words were intended for Logan Berkeley and Althea. "I suppose," he said, with false modesty, "that I was too stupid to do anything else."

O'Mara roared with mirth. "Do not be telling me that, young man. You are not stupid and you know it. As for your smartness, I suspect that it consisted merely in listening to good advice. I'm wondering who it could have been. Our melancholy friend De Quille, perhaps?"

• "Perhaps."

"Ye see," and O'Mara made a sweeping gesture, "he has the mark of the great financier on him already. He says neither Yes or No. He says Perhaps. He leaves it to us to judge. Mark my words: One of these days we will be humbly approaching Mr. Douglas, as a man of great importance, and we will be after asking him whether stock will go up or down, and he will answer, as all the great ones answer: 'Well,

it depends on circumstances. It could go up, but then, on the other hand, it could go down.' And later, when it has done one or the other—which it could not help but do—we will remember half of what he has said, and give him credit for colossal astuteness."

They all laughed, some more sincerely than the others. Malcolm said, not without malice: "I really owe this to Logan. I always thought that Big Cypress was half his and half mine. I told him as much when I put in my claim for half his Rattlesnake workings." He smiled with apparent warmth at Logan. "It's a pity you didn't see things as I saw them, Logan. I'd have shared your Rattlesnake misfortune, and you would have owned half of my present good luck. I imagine you could be prevailed upon to see things differently now, couldn't you?"

"How?" asked Berkeley.

"Well, suppose I said that I still held to my original theory? Suppose I declared that you, by rights, were still half-owner of what used to be Big Cypress?"

Logan shook his head. "I'm afraid that wouldn't change my viewpoint, Malcolm. I saw things one way when you came to Virginia City. I see them the same way today. My luck was, in the long run, bad. I hope yours remains good."

"Spoken like a gentleman of the Old South," said Malcolm. "Unswerving honesty, implacable integrity. You have my sincerest admiration. Unfortunately I'll admit that if our positions were reversed I would be exceedingly envious."

Logan said: "Only you can know that positively, Malcolm. I acted in the way I thought was right. I still think it was right."

"And if I should make a real fortune, you won't regret the stand you took?"

"No," said Logan quietly, and with great conviction. "I never will."

Malcolm glanced at Althea. She was eating silently, her eyes on her plate, her color high. Otherwise, she showed no symptom of what she might be thinking, but Malcolm could not forbear drawing her into the conversation.

"What do you think, Althea?" he inquired.

She met his eyes, then dropped hers before his unwinking gaze. "Logan has always done what he believed to be right."

"Of course. It is his heritage. But what is your personal opinion?"

"I wish you luck, too, Malcolm." She turned her attention to O'Mara. "Do you think the strike they've made is a great one, Mr. O'Mara?"

"That I do."

H

"You're probably overenthusiastic."

" 'Tis that I am, all right," Althea. But I do not often find myself so sure inside. I've been long on the Comstock. I saw the first great boom in the early days, and watched it peter out. I witnessed the boom of a few years ago, and had no confidence in it. But this is different. These workings are deep, and they're in the hands of good men. It is my belief that they'd already have hit a solid wall of country rock if that was what Fate intended. But since they didn't, since they followed a trail of low-grade ore into ore of better grade, there will be no stopping this thing until all of them, including yourself, Malcolm Douglas, are rolling in silver and gold."

"And who do you think was right in the first place, as between Logan and myself?"

" 'Tis not a fair question, me lad. There's the prospector's side and there's the legal side. And why should you be so interested in that forgotten problem now? You've each gone your way, you and Logan. You are happy, and as for Logan, I'll say I never have seen in him any sign of regret for the course he took."

A quiet voice spoke from the end of the table, and all eyes turned to Deborah Cortland. "I think," she said steadily, "that Malcolm is deliberately trying to be cruel." Malcolm's face flushed, and he saw Logan raise his eyebrows in surprise as he looked at Deborah as though seeing her for the first time.

Logan said, "I don't think that, Deborah. Malcolm believed he was justified in resenting my refusal to accept him as my partner in the Rattlesnake. It's only natural and human that he should enjoy reminding me that I made a bad guess. Except—" and he smiled,—"except that it wasn't a guess. It was a conviction. If we were starting over, and if I knew what was to be, I'd feel the same way and do the same thing."

"I know you would." That was Deborah again. "I don't believe you could do anything else."

Althea was regarding Deborah with fresh interest. Her own mind was busy behind a pretty face which betrayed nothing. She was thinking: "Why is Deborah defending Logan so earnestly? Why is she trying so hard to make him feel better? What is her interest in Logan? Why should she be interested in him at all now, when he has lost his money? Why shouldn't she be more interested in Malcolm, who may be about to become rich?"

Deborah. Logan. It was a new idea to Althea. Somehow, she had never regarded Deborah as being possessed of complete womanhood. She was too independent a person, too open in her independence, too different from all other women.

And now, unexpectedly, Deborah Cortland had entered the picture. Althea sensed that if Deborah was an opponent, she would prove a worthy one.

She drew a deep breath. "I'll wait," she told herself. "Everything will depend on how rich Malcolm actually becomes."

• LV

FOR A FEW BRIEF DAYS perfect summer weather came to the Washoe. The air was clear and pleasantly hot; the nights were cool but not cold. There was no rain; there was never any rain in the summer.

Residents of Virginia City and Gold Hill sunned themselves on their verandas and in their infinitesimal yards. They gazed at the brilliant sun and reveled in the motionless air.

Rattlesnakes appeared in the hills and canyons; tarantulas waddled about intent on making the most of their breeding season; wasps took to the air and hunted the tarantulas; a few sidewinders slithered about in the alkali dust which covered the countryside. For vegetation there was nothing but the scrubby gray sage which did nothing to relieve the barrenness.

But while there was warm sunshine and an absence of wind, the residents of the Comstock enjoyed themselves. They smiled at one another, and exchanged fatuous remarks about the weather, chiefly because they had such small opportunity to enjoy it. Above ground there was a dropping away of tension, a momentary and fragile relaxation.

Mrs. Anna Schultz Carmichael sat near the open window of her room. She wore a simple gingham dress which made her ample figure look even more ample. Her honey-colored hair was brushed back neatly. Her cheeks were bright and pink, there was a half-smile on her lips, and her calm blue eyes were intent on her needlework.

She was working slowly but expertly on a centerpiece, an elaborately conceived design of improbable roses. On the sewing table beside her were innumerable skeins of varicolored embroidery silk, and her creation was taking definite form. Her hands were steady, and her placid manner gave no hint that there was anything on her mind more important than the completion of the bit of fancywork.

There was a knock on the door, and Mom said, "Come in." Deborah Cortland entered. Mom smiled at the girl and gestured to a rock-

ing chair. "I'm glad you could come, Deborah. I want to have a long talk with you while the house isn't overrun with folks."

Deborah, tall and dark and beautiful in a way which transcended mere prettiness, touched Mom's shoulder lightly as she passed. She settled herself in the chair, breathed deeply of the pungent summer air, and smiled at Mom.

"The meeting," she said lightly, "will now come to order."

It was precisely the right note. It dispelled any lurking doubt Mom may have had about the advisability of consulting this strangely attractive young woman.

Mom did not stop her embroidering. She merely glanced up, nodded, and said, "I'm not aiming to impose on you, Deborah, but it seems like I got to talk to somebody, and there isn't anyone else around here with sense enough to understand."

Deborah waited.

"It's about this mess that's brewing," Mom said slowly. "It's about Logan and Althea and Malcolm. Yes, and it's about you, too."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Course you know. Those eyes of yours never miss anything. And you got more sense in your little finger than anybody else in this madhouse has got in their whole body."

"Thank you, Mom. And now shall I pay you a compliment?"

Their eyes met, and each understood the laughter that flashed briefly between them.

"Where's it leading to?" asked Mom. "What's going to come out of all this crazy mixup?"

Deborah said: "Suppose you tell me what you think. Maybe you've seen some things that I've missed."

"All right. Only, I want a promise, Deborah. If we're going to say things to each other, let's make them honest things. Being polite, and keeping things to ourselves—that isn't going to do any good at all."

"I promise."

"Well"—Mom's needle probed through the linen that was stretched across the embroidery frame—"there isn't any use beating about the bush. What concerns me most is Althea. Let me explain something, Deborah. I'm not a blind mother. Of course I love Althea. I think I understand her. But I know all her faults just as well as I know her good qualities."

"I know you do," said Deborah.

"She's had lots of hardship. She was born in a wagon and raised in a wagon. It's all right to talk about folks having a love of theatricals in their blood, but Althea never had that. As she grew older and be-

gan to develop into a downright pretty girl. I could almost read her thoughts. She was thinking that she was going to trade what God had given her for what man could provide, and I'm here to say I never blamed her."

Deborah said quietly: "I agree with you. I've always had an admiration for Althea. I admire anyone with a definite goal and the determination to attain it. You may not believe me, Mom, but basically Althea and I are a good deal alike."

"I knew that long ago," responded Mom surprisingly, "but I didn't know that you were keen enough to see it. You started different from Althea. There were things you had and things you wanted. You shucked the ones you had and went after what you wanted. You didn't let anything stand in your way: not family or friends or a fear of what folks would say. That's Althea's way of living, too. But there's this difference, Deborah: as far as I know, you haven't ever hurt anybody. But it seems like to me the way things are going, someone's bound to get hurt. And bad."

"I, for instance?"

Again that swift, surprised glance from Mom. "I declare, Deborah, every minute you stay in this room talking to me, you make me admire you more. Yes, I mean you. I mean Logan and Malcolm, too."

"And Althea?"

"No. Not Althea. That girl of mine never seems to get hurt. I don't know why it is, Deborah, but she sort of figures things out and takes them as they come. She's always either got what she wants or she's scheming to get it. About the worst that will happen to her will be that she'll be disappointed."

Deborah was silent for a minute or two. Then she said: "Look, Mom, that doesn't fit with what you said when we started talking. You said then that you were worried primarily about Althea. Now you say—"

"It does sound like I was contradicting myself, doesn't it? But I'm not, really. I'm worried about what Althea may do, or may cause others to do. I'm worried for fear she'll make a mistake on account of her being so young."

"Come now, Mom. Not *that* young."

"Gosh! You're right, at that. She's twenty-two. I keep thinking of her as a child."

"I'm twenty-nine," said Deborah. "Practically an old lady." She smiled brightly when she spoke, but the thought carried a sting. Twenty-nine was an appalling age. In one year she'd be thirty. All the common sense in the world couldn't keep her from knowing that the years had swept from her some of the freshness of youth. She'd

lost something that could never be restored. She dreaded the day when folks would stop saying, "There's that amazing Deborah Cortland," and would say instead, "There's that eccentric Cortland woman."

Mom broke into the younger woman's train of thought. She said: "What's come over Malcolm? I never saw a young man change that much."

Deborah said softly, "Don't you know, Mom?"

"You mean about him being mad at Logan Berkeley? Sure, I understand that. It was one of those things that could happen anywhere, to anybody. Malcolm saw it one way, Logan saw it the other."

"It's a lot deeper than that, Mom. Did you know that Malcolm was raised on the plantation which the Berkeleys owned? That Malcolm's father was the overseer?"

"What's wrong with that? What's wrong with your father doing good honest work?"

"There was a difference where they lived, Mom. In South Carolina, or any of the other plantation States, there was a lot of difference. Malcolm grew up with a feeling of inferiority. It wasn't justified or justifiable, but it was there. It was in the air he breathed and in the food he ate. He couldn't escape from it."

"But look," Mom was trying hard to understand. "Didn't the war change all that? Isn't it true Malcolm was an officer and Logan wasn't?"

"That made it worse. You see, Logan didn't even want to be an officer. He didn't have to prove anything."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I'm afraid it does. When Malcolm loaned Logan the money to come west, when Logan was even to that extent dependent on him, Malcolm felt better. Then the Comstock changed all that, and they were back where they started. Logan was once again on top; Malcolm was once again the inferior. Not physically—he's just as strong that way as Logan. Not mentally—he's Logan's superior mentally. But socially."

"There aren't any social lines in Virginia City," scoffed Mom. "If you have money, you're way up high socially. If you haven't got it, you don't count."

"That's the point. That's just the reason Malcolm is so excited over this new bonanza. He's probably going to be rich. Logan is a glorified laborer."

"Then why isn't Malcolm happy?"

"Because," explained Deborah, "it hasn't changed anything. Malcolm feels the onset of power; he's beginning to realize that folks on

the Comstock are looking up to him because it appears likely that he's about to become rich. But Logan doesn't react the way Malcolm wants him to, and Malcolm will never be happy until he does."

Mom nodded thoughtfully. "I see what you mean. Like the day Logan was made assistant foreman at the Chollar-Potosi. He was proud. Malcolm would have felt ashamed. Is that what you're driving at?"

"Yes."

"Then what's it leading to?"

"I don't know. Trouble, I'm afraid. It isn't enough that Malcolm will acquire wealth. To achieve his purpose, he has to cut Logan Berkeley down. It may not be admirable, but to me it's understandable." Deborah hesitated, and Mom detected spots of high color on her cheeks. The younger woman said, somewhat hesitantly, "Is Malcolm in love with Althea?"

"He was. Or leastways, I think he was. Then after she married Logan, I thought he kind of liked you. I still think so."

"He likes me, Mom. But not enough."

"Enough for what?"

"To forget Althea."

"But if he's really in love with you . . ."

"I try to understand this, Mom. Everything in the world has become unimportant to Malcolm except one thing: proving himself Logan's superior. He must have more wealth, more power, more position. Well, he's either got those things now or it seems certain that he's going to get them. And Logan hasn't changed. What's the use of having triumphed over a man if he doesn't know he's been defeated? So there's only one thing Malcolm could do which would be bound to make Logan aware of the fact that he'd been beaten."

"What's that?"

"Take Althea away from him."

Mom's needle poised in midair. She said: "Logan's in love with her. He wouldn't let her go."

"I know. That's the reason why taking her from Logan would mean so much to Malcolm. Logan was unchanged by success, unchanged by disaster, unchanged by becoming an ordinary miner, unchanged by being promoted to assistant foreman, unchanged by the knowledge that Malcolm was about to make a fortune from Big Cypress. But losing Althea will change Logan. He won't take that calmly."

Mom's eyes were deep with worry. "Two young men like that: fearless, bitter . . ." She placed her embroidery on the table and arranged the skeins of bright-colored silk in neat parallel rows. She

said: "It's taken me a long time to get around to what I really wanted with you, Deborah. But I've got to ask you a personal question first. Are you in love with Malcolm?"

"Yes."

"That makes it easier, what I'm going to suggest. I think he loves you. You understand him. You two could be happy together. It seems that whatever you do would be justified."

"Such as . . ." prompted Deborah.

"If a woman's in love with a man, and if he's in love with her, she can make him want her. She can make him marry her. Oh! I know an ordinary girl would say it wasn't dignified or maidenly. But I figure you're better than a girl who thinks and acts only like she's been taught. I figure you can see that the results would justify what methods you used."

"I've tried," stated Deborah calmly. "I'm still trying." Her voice fell. "But I'm not going to succeed. Mom! This thing that has been eating into Malcolm is stronger than any love he could ever have for me or for any other woman."

"That isn't according to nature."

"It's according to Malcolm," Deborah said with a touch of bitterness in her voice. "Oh! I'll continue doing my best, Mom. But it still won't work. No one is as important in Malcolm's life as Logan Berkeley."

"Then all we can do is to sit back and watch trouble catch up with us?"

"It's the way things are, Mom. How they're going to work out, God only knows. I'm sorry for Malcolm and for Logan. I'm even a little sorry for Althea."

"And I'm most sorry for you, Deborah."

The younger woman nodded, and her voice was now quite steady. "I'm sorry, too," she said. "I'm terribly sorry for me."

LVI

LATE IN JULY, the Comstock held its greatest celebration. It was a celebration over the bringing to the Comstock of that most essential of all commodities: water.

And once again the daring and enterprise of the new firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien were to be thanked.

Of gold and silver there always had been plenty, of wealth and

high wages there always had been enough. But from the first boom days of 1859 until the year 1873, the Comstock had been without good or adequate water.

Virginia City and Gold Hill were congested communities existing in the midst of arid barrenness. During the winters water had been obtainable from melting snow; during the summers there was no rainfall. There was a water company, controlled by the ubiquitous William Sharon, but, as usual, Mr. Sharon and his associates had been concerned only with getting as much as possible for as little as possible.

As organizers and owners of the Virginia & Gold Hill Water Company, they had for years delivered to the unfortunate residents of the Comstock a thin trickle of water which was loaded with such minor poisons as to make dysentery and other intestinal ailments a community affair. The quality and quantity of the water had made it a luxury, and had compelled the majority of the citizens to resort to whisky as the standard beverage—a necessity which most of the gentlemen thought was not without its advantages but which the more conservative ladies viewed with vast disfavor.

Back in 1869, when Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien, flushed with their victory over Sharon in the Hale & Norcross deal, had looked about for investments, they had hit upon water as the most logical. They believed implicitly in the permanence of Virginia City; they expected it to grow and prosper; they sensed that people could neither live happily, nor even die happily, under existing conditions.

With money won from Sharon in the Hale & Norcross deal, they bought from Sharon his stock in the water company. Most of the stock was owned by the four ambitious and enterprising Irishmen, and the balance of it went to their friends W. S. Hobart and Johnny Skae. Calmly and courageously they undertook the project of bringing fine fresh water in limitless quantities from the topmost snow levels of the Sierras.

The Crown Point and Belcher bonanzas had not then been discovered. The Comstock was at the nadir of its second great depression, and the project required the investment of more than a million dollars and the exercise of unimaginable engineering skill. Informed of their plans, Sharon had a private chuckle.

"They're getting too big for their britches," he said. "To do what they're planning, they'll have to build a pipe which will stand a vertical pressure of 1,720 feet. It's impossible—even for fools."

Through the bleak, barren span which marked the end of the sixties and the very early seventies, the six partners grimly poured money into their newest enterprise. Until then men had dug into

the earth of the Comstock and carried things away. Now, for the first time, something valuable was to be brought to Virginia City and Gold Hill in quantity.

In active charge of the work they had Hermann Schussler, chief engineer of the Spring Valley Water Works in San Francisco. He supervised the laying of his pipe in the form of a huge inverted siphon, with the long arm running up the eastern side of the Sierras and the other reaching to the summit of the Virginia Range, with the depressed curve crossing the upper end of the Washoe Valley.

On the morning of July 29, 1873, the people of the Comstock rose early and in a fever of excitement. This was the day set aside for the opening of the new flow of water, this was something which would affect the general living conditions of the Comstock as nothing else had ever done, and which was calculated to improve the health of every man, woman, and child in the region.

Work in all the mines was suspended, save for skeleton maintenance crews. From early morning there were parades of magnificently uniformed drill teams, of fire departments in their red shirts and huge red-and-gold hats, and of a half dozen bands which made up in noise what they may have lacked in harmony.

The public was out in force. Certain gentlemen were already commencing to display their sorrow at the intrusion of water by attempting to drink all the whisky that was left. There was a great, good-natured communal drunkenness. Politicians and would-be politicians launched into frenzied harangues on the slightest provocation, or on no provocation at all.

Eventually there was a final set of speeches in the vicinity of Bullion Ravine. The signal was flashed back to the high point of the Sierras. The first of a series of watercocks was turned. Then the second and the third and on and on and on.

And then, incredibly, the water started gushing into the ravine. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of fresh, pure, crystal-clear water the first good water the Comstock had ever had.

Fireworks were set off in tremendous quantities, bands redoubled their noise, speakers lashed themselves into frenzies of entomium and a few skeptical old-timers even made so bold as to sample the strange new beverage.

Once again the firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien had achieved the impossible. It also had served notice on the Bank crowd that it would not be content to make its money solely from mining.

It was a day of grandeur and hysteria. People sang and danced and laughed and wept and even got sober. There were a few beautiful battles resulting from debates on the efficacy of water. And then

catastrophe came. The pipe sprung a leak and the water was turned off. The flood had become a mirage, and Sharon gleetully said, "I told you so."

But the period of gloom was short-lived. Schussler and his men, working like beavers, repaired the leak, and on the eighth day of August the water started flowing in earnest, and was never thereafter interrupted.

Mr. William Sharon stopped smiling.

All through that long, pleasant summer the Comstock had lived in a state of expectancy. While pessimism was by no means as general as it had been during the final two years of the last decade and the first two years of this one, it was also true that optimism was not noticeably in evidence.

The trouble was that this was not a period of pyrotechnics. The Bank crowd owned the Belcher, which was in bonanza and was devoting itself to the businesslike removal of rich ore. John J. Jones and Alvinza Hayward directed their energies to extracting wealth from the Crown Point. There was no fanfare about either operation, since none of the owners cared whether the stock rose or fell.

At the other end of the Lode, Messrs. Mackay, Fair, and O'Brien kept their crews busy night and day in the deep workings of Consolidated Virginia. They, too, refrained from advertising the astounding extent of the continually expanding ore bodies; but, on the other hand, they made no secret of the fact that they were in bonanza. Their technique in the matter of public relations was new, and it became popular to express doubt as to the extent of the discovery.

At length John Mackay and Jim Fair became annoyed. They sought wealth legitimately, they claimed, and not by manipulating stock. If the people wanted the truth about their beloved Consolidated Virginia, the people could have it.

Dan De Quille was selected as the public's first emissary. His mining knowledge was great, his integrity unimpeachable. De Quille was invited to go down into the Consolidated Virginia workings, to examine everything, to go anywhere he chose.

Jim Fair said, "I'm getting God dam' sick and tired of having people doubt our statements. We're miners, not stockbrokers. Take as long as you want down there, Dan. Ask any questions you want. Take samples, and take 'em from where you choose. Have them assayed wherever you want. Then write the truth as you see it."

On October 29th, Dan's first report appeared in the *Enterprise* under the headlines:

CONSOLIDATED VIRGINIA

A LOOK THROUGH THE LONG-FORBIDDEN LOWER LEVELS, THE ORE BODIES AND BREASTS, WINZES & DRIFTS

RICH DEVELOPMENTS

De Quille's report was restrained, yet he could not conceal his enthusiasm and amazement. He picked five samples of ore at random and had them assayed. They averaged \$379.43 to the ton in silver and gold. The following day he returned and selected three more samples, and these averaged \$443.83.

He let the facts speak for themselves as he wrote with the consciousness that misrepresentation on his part could trick the gullible public into another disastrous stock-buying orgy.

But privately Dan's enthusiasm was unbounded. "I saw it with my own eyes," he said. "And yet I could not believe what I saw."

He made a tentative estimate that Consolidated Virginia alone, on the basis of the trend, direction, and scope of the ore discovered, would reach the staggering total of \$300,000,000.

Eleven days before the publication of Dan De Quille's report, Consolidated Virginia split up its stock. Five months earlier, Malcolm Douglas's 500 shares had become 600. On October 18th his 600 became 2,700 shares. The stock, after the split-up, was quoted at 48.

Malcolm got out pencil and paper and did some figuring. His original ownership in a worthless mine, a mine which had been hopelessly in borrasca, had mushroomed into 2,700 shares in the Big Bonanza.

His gross worth at that moment was \$129,600.

LVII

A FEW DAYS AFTER the publication of the De Quille report, Malcolm issued an invitation.

They were seated about the fire in the parlor of the mansion. Malcolm said: "I've got John Mackay's permission to invite you folks down for an inspection of the Consolidated Virginia workings whenever you want to go. I think you'll like it."

Deborah smiled at him. "Whom are you inviting?" she asked

"All of you. You, Deborah, and Logan and Althea and Mom and

the Professor. John will go down with us, and he'll also send an engineer along to explain things." Malcolm smiled apologetically. "I don't know a thing about mines," he said. "I'm merely a stockholder."

Mom said she didn't believe she'd go. The Professor said that he'd been down in a mine once and never wanted to go again: they always made him feel as though he were suffocating. Logan, who knew mines and mining, said quietly that he'd be delighted. He was apparently unaware that there might be a hidden purpose behind Malcolm's invitation. Althea said she thought it would be marvelous, and she was so grateful to Malcolm for including her. Deborah, looking from Althea to Logan to Mom to Malcolm, asked quietly whether it would be all right for her to take her sketch pad, and Malcolm assured her that of course it would.

The following morning they gathered at the Consolidated Virginia shaft. Clad in the rough clothes which were essential if they were to brave the heat and steam and dirt of the lower levels, not even the two girls looked glamorous. They wore heavy woollen skirts, boots which were too large, and hats which flopped over their ears in spite of the stuffing in the hatbands. Each person carried a lantern.

John Mackay welcomed them personally. His calm gray eyes were friendly, his manner unassuming. He was particularly cordial to Logan Berkeley, and congratulated him on his excellent work as an assistant foreman at Chollar Potosi. He paid simple, shy compliments to Althea and Deborah. He introduced them to Walter Ramsay, a big, brawny, towheaded young mining engineer who, Mackay explained, could fairly swamp them with technical explanations if that was what they wanted.

The hoist engineer lowered the cage with great care. They stepped out at the new 1,500-foot level of Consolidated Virginia, and found the heat not too intolerable since, some weeks previously, air tunnels had been dug connecting the new workings with the airshaft of the Ophir which adjoined it on the north, so that fresh air was constantly being drawn down the Ophir shaft and circulated through the Consolidated Virginia before being forced upward and out. It was not, reflected Malcolm, comfortable, but there was none of the feeling of suffocation which had marked his trip below on that memorable day a half-year earlier.

They progressed slowly and carefully through a narrow stope, moving in single file, with Walter Ramsay leading the way. He paused just before rounding a turn in the narrow passageway and smiled back at them.

"In just a moment," he said, "you're going to see something which will startle you. Take your time. Look it over. Then ask all the questions you want."

But all his preparation proved inadequate. They followed him into a cavern 150 feet in width and almost one hundred feet in height. In all directions, and at all levels, they could see the miners working, clinging to scaffoldings as they prepared their charges or labored at removing the ore already blasted.

The cavern was enormous, but it looked larger than it actually was because it was so deep below the surface of the earth. The heavy air was dimly lighted with lanterns, and in little crevices in the walls were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of candles. The effect was super natural; it was like the improbable treasure caves of mythology.

All about them was a glitter, something which shone from the walls of the cavern. Althea clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"Gold," she said. "Look at all the gold shining at us."

The slow, amused voice of the young engineer broke into her enthusiasm. "Sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. Berkeley. That stuff you see glittering so brightly is neither silver nor gold. It's all iron and copper pyrites."

Althea said, "Oh . . ."

"On the other hand," Walter Ramsay continued, "all of the unpretty, unimpressive stuff you see is silver or gold. The richest, probably, that has ever been discovered."

Althea said: "But it doesn't look like anything. Why doesn't it shine?"

She looked so pretty, so helpless, so eager. It would have taken a shrewder person than young Walter Ramsay to have detected personal interest and greed.

"We've two kinds of silver ore in here," he explained patiently. "That black stuff you see in such quantities—the kind with the slight metallic luster—that's sulphuret, or silver glance. The steel-gray, with the greenish tinge, is chloride ore."

Deborah Cortlandt was standing alone, and silent. The light in her eyes was not of avarice. The thing in her which made her different from others was impelling her to create—or, if that proved greater than her artistic ability—then to interpret.

There must be some way, she was thinking, that this could be transferred to canvas; not the minutiae of the operations themselves, but the feel of it, the grotesque, satanic quality, the half-naked figures of men moving about in the eerie light of lanterns and flickering candles, the sense of greatness and the sense of impermanence.

If she only had the ability to make others feel as she was feeling!

She opened her pad and sketched rapidly, appalled by her own inadequacy. Oh! she'd be able to turn out good, graphic sketches which would make people see what she had seen, but that, she figured, was not enough. How to make them know that the dark, somber walls of the man-made cavern were almost solid silver and that the gleaming, glittering sham of the copper and iron pyrites meant nothing. How to mark the difference between the pyrites and the small but spectacular deposits of stephanite which was almost pure silver in the form of crystals. How to give the impression of grandeur on the stanch timbered square sets rising one upon another in giant crates arranged like mammoth playtoys of children, of making someone understand that the square sets were necessary because the earth was so soft and rich with silver that it would collapse if it were not supported anew in every cubic foot that was hewn away. How to make people know that the solid rock was worthless and that the soft, ugly deposit was of incalculable value.

She listened to the quiet explanation of the young mining engineer. He was pointing out glittering spangles in the rich deposits of black sulphuret of silver and telling Althea that it was free gold. He was explaining, too, that thus far approximately 44 per cent of all the ore that had been hoisted to the surface for mining had been gold, "—not in quantity of course, but in value."

A quiet voice came from behind her, and she looked up from her sketching long enough to catch the fine dark eyes of Logan Berkeley. He said, "I think you have something there, Deborah."

"Something . . ."

"Yes." He chose his words carefully. "Not just the value in dollars and cents. You've sort of put down the way it affects me, inside."

She closed her sketch pad and got up abruptly from the boulder of silver on which she had been sitting. She said, "That's about the nicest thing that's ever been said to me, Logan."

"I'll wager you've had plenty of compliments."

"Yes. But never one that showed the understanding . . ." She let her voice trail off.

She saw a slow smile appear beneath his little mustache. "I'm not really supposed to be sensitive, am I, Deborah? I'm not supposed to see things unless they're mighty obvious."

She evaded neither his eyes nor his question. "No," she said, "You're not. You're supposed to be a fine man, an honest man—"

"And a stupid man. Well, perhaps I am."

She regarded him gravely in the odd, unnatural light. He looked taller than he'd ever looked before, and oddly graceful despite the uncouth miner's garb.

A new respect for Logan came to her, or rather it was a new sort of respect. Never before had she credited the man with intelligence. Brain, perhaps, but not with intelligence; not with perception, not with an awareness of the estimate in which others held him. It was like meeting a new person who looked exactly like someone else you'd known.

"Your surprise is flattering," he said in amusement. "Is it so amazing that I should make one thoughtful comment?"

She felt a sense of embarrassment, a desire for a moment alone to think over her discovery. To believe that one has been in the company of a blind man, and then to learn suddenly that he is not blind . . . it was a disturbing thought. It injected a new, explosive quality into a situation which required no such new ingredient.

She made a gesture which included all the mine—the part of it they could see and the vast workings beyond; the stopes and galleries and crosscuts and winzes and upraises; the massive timbering, the organized disorder, the little cars filled with ore clanking along on their narrow tracks; the flickering candles and steadier light of the lanterns; the grotesque shadows cast on dark backgrounds of near solid silver—and she said, "Is this more than you expected, Logan?"

He nodded gravely. "Much more. And long ago I learned to expect the impossible on the Comstock."

"How big would you estimate this discovery to be?"

"My estimate wouldn't mean a thing. But if you're asking me to guess, I'd say that De Quille underestimated when he said \$200,000,000."

—She said, calculatingly and deliberately, "You owned a part of this once."

"Yes. As nearly as I can figure, I owned half of this very cavern we're standing in. It's quite an impressive feeling."

"In just what way?"

He shrugged. "The chance of mining, the gambling element. This bonanza could have been anywhere else, but it wasn't. It was here—all the time. The men who uncovered it deserve everything they get."

"How about those who are sharing the good fortune through sheer luck?"

"Malcolm deserves his good fortune, too. I hope for his sake that he hasn't passed beyond the point of enjoying it."

"You think that perhaps he has?"

"Possibly. He's changed a lot since we were boys. I'm sorry."

"Aren't you to blame . . . a little?"

"No. I did what I believed was right. I'd do the same thing again."

I don't begrudge him his present luck. As to his ability to enjoy it

"Go ahead, Logan. Please."

"Have you ever been in the South, Deborah? Did you ever visit a plantation in the days before the war?"

"No."

"Then it would be hard to explain what I mean. We had a way of life there. It had its injustices, its inequities. But it also had a rightness and a charm. No matter how right or how wrong the system may have been, I believe we had an appreciation, an understanding. We enjoyed life in a rich, full way."

"Just a few of you enjoyed that," said Deborah. "An infinitesimal number."

"That's true. And we were probably rather smug about accepting it." He smiled down at her, and for just an instant the light of a passing lantern limned the saber cut along the line of his strong jaw. "It's gone, all of it. No matter what the future holds, it'll never again be as it was. I'm glad I'm not there to see the change. I'm afraid I'd never adjust myself to it."

"You've adjusted yourself here."

"Have I? I'm glad I give that impression."

Another surprise Deborah said, with quickening interest, "What makes you doubt it?"

"Malcolm. He's the one who has adjusted himself to this new way of living. He has become hard and purposeful; perhaps 'implacable' is the word. I admire him for it."

"But you don't envy him."

"No. But then that makes us even, because he doesn't envy me, either. You know, it's odd about Malcolm. He thinks I used to feel superior to him. He was wrong. Now he thinks that if he becomes very wealthy, I'll feel inferior. He's wrong again." Logan made a move to rejoin the others. "I've talked too much and too foolishly," he said. "But you have the faculty of drawing people out, Deborah."

They joined Malcolm and Althea, John Mackay and Walter Ramsay. Ramsay was doing all the talking, and Mackay was trailing along, showing all the symptoms a young father displays in the precociousness of an infant son.

Deborah lagged a few steps behind, her mind busy with this new facet of Logan Berkeley's character. He was impressive and frightening. He knew too much about how he felt and about how Malcolm felt. How much, Deborah wondered, did he know about what was going on in Althea's mind? Did he understand that her eager chattering, her volley of questions, her excited interest, had a per-

sonal application? Could Logan know that his wife was trying to estimate the material worth of young Malcolm Douglas? Could he see other things so clearly and yet be blind to the thing which was closest?

The answer eluded her. The way of men with maids, the blindness of love, the dulled edge of perception where women were concerned. Anything seemed possible now.

For all the grotesque jacket she wore, and the shapeless skirt, for all the heavy, dirty boots and the ugly hat, Althea had never looked lovelier. She had harnessed both John Mackay and young Ramsay to the yoke of her charm. They were flattered by her interest; they played the roles of unaccustomed but delighted gallants. They did not—they could not possibly—sense the undercurrent of her questioning, nor fathom the processes of her nimble brain.

It was only Malcolm who seemed to understand. He did not look fatuous, nor did he look like a young man in love. He was regarding Althea with interest and amusement, as though she were a mechanical toy performing a mechanical and well understood routine. He said quietly: "You mustn't overestimate this, Althea. And remember, what I own is only the tiniest portion of this bonanza."

She dazzled him with a smile. "I declare, Malcolm," she said breathlessly, "the way you do go on! There's no such thing as a tiny part of this. It's so—so incredible that even the littlest portion is tremendous, isn't it, Mr. Mackay?"

John Mackay nodded gravely. "We hope you're right, Mrs. Berkeley," he said.

They moved back along the crooked gallery toward the hoisting works. Men stopped their digging and loading long enough to look with some curiosity, and considerable approval, at the two girls; both beautiful, one blond, one brunet. A couple of the miners called greetings to Deborah, and she waved back at them in comradely fashion. A few others greeted the quiet, unassuming part owner of the bonanza. They said, "Hi, John," and Mackay answered them, calling each man by name.

They stepped into the cage and were rushed to the cold, clear air on the surface. John Mackay insisted on taking them to the International for lunch, laughing away their protests about their appearance.

It was a fine midafternoon lunch. It was featured, of course, by the oysters, which were amazingly fresh now that they were brought in by railroad; the oysters which people ate whether or not they liked oysters, because it was a mark of distinction,

They were all still gripped by the excitement of what they had

seen, by the possibilities of it, by the certainty that it would go on and on, getting richer each day. It was an intoxicating thing.

And throughout the lunch Logan Berkeley sat quietly, letting others do most of the talking. His eyes dwelt fondly on his young wife, and once, as she chattered gaily, he caught Deborah's eye and winked.

It was a friendly, intimate, pleasant gesture. It proclaimed his acknowledgment of a new status, a new understanding between them.

But it left Deborah deeply disturbed because the new Logan Berkeley—or rather, the old Logan Berkeley whom she had newly come to know—was more of a man than she had thought. That he would always have acted for himself she had known. What frightened her was the knowledge that he could think for himself, too.

LVIII

FROM THE *Enterprise*, December 17, 1873:

Announcement has just been made that a new bonary mine has been incorporated. It will be known as the California.

The California is merely the north 600 feet of what has been known up to now as Consolidated Virginia. The south 710 feet will continue to be known by that name. Stockholders of Cons. Virginia will receive a dividend of 7 1/2% of a share in stock of the new California for each share they hold in the parent company. By this simple process, there are now two bonary mines instead of one, and each has outstanding 108,000 shares. As of yesterday, Cons. Virginia stock was selling at \$67 and California at \$37.

Malcolm Douglas bent over a desk in the newspaper office. The figuring was simple enough, and quite pleasant. He now owned 2,700 shares of Consolidated Virginia and 10,575 shares of California, giving him a total gross worth of \$239,175.

He looked up to find Joe Goodman smiling down at him.

"How does it feel to be a millionaire, Malcolm?"

"Scary." Malcolm grinned like a kid. "Of course, I really haven't got it, you know. It's all on paper and I owe money on it."

"Any time you want to cash in . . ."

"Not right now, Joe. Maybe not for a long time."

Goodman came straight to the point. "When are you quitting the job here, Malcolm?"

The young man raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Am I being kicked out?"

"Hell, no. But why should you hold on to a \$60 a week job when—"

"Because it's a good job," answered Malcolm. "Because I like it. And because my bonanza stocks aren't paying dividends and I still enjoy eating."

"You know damned well you can borrow whatever you need any time you need it."

"True enough. But I don't want to do that again. I'd rather work for my daily expenses. Unless, of course, you want the job for some one else. I don't wish to be selfish."

Goodman clapped Malcolm on the shoulder in hearty friendliness. "You're a contradictory person," he announced. "Generous and thoughtful and friendly and hard and distant and ingrowing. Which are you, actually?"

Malcolm looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm damned if I know," he said.

Additional news items from the *Enterprise* in 1874:

January 12th

Although his candidacy has not yet been formally announced, it is understood that William Sharon will again run for the United States Senate.

January 21st

Wright's Drygoods & Notions Emporium on C Street takes pleasure in announcing receipt of a large shipment of the finest materials for ladies' silk, taffeta, brocade and the best imported linen and laces. Also ribbon in all widths.

January 20th.

A great new joint shaft is rapidly being sunk by the two bonanza mines, Con Virginia and California. It is located 1,040 feet east of the old Con Virginia shaft and will greatly facilitate the extraction of the rich ore and make it easier to tap the Lode on its eastward dip to a vertical depth of 2,500 feet. This will be known as the C. & C. Shaft and will be the largest and best on the Lode.

February 15th

A woman named Hallet was found dead in her room in a house of ill fame on D Street last night. Her death is attributed to laudanum, despondency, acute alcoholism and bad investments.

February 23rd

Yesterday was the birthday of Geo Washington, first President of the U.S. There was a fine parade of the fire and drill companies on C Street followed by considerable drinking and several fights. Private parties were held in various homes, and the Stars & Stripes were everywhere in evidence.

March 3rd

Work continues apace at the Belcher and Crown Point mines. With those large enterprises still in bonanza at one end of the Lode, and Con. Virginia and California in bonanza at the other end, it seems that the Comstock has nothing to look forward to except prosperity.

March 10th

Mrs. John W. Mackay, wife of the popular and genial John W. Mackay of this city, is cutting a wide social swathe in Paris where her lavish new mansion is the cynosure of all eyes. Mr. Mackay continues to live modestly in his two rooms at the International Hotel here.

March 30th

Most of the sporting gentry of this city journeyed to Silver City last week to witness a prize fight between the Carson Slasher and Joe Moncrief. The bout was held in a warehouse and was most interesting and bloody. Moncrief won easily in 84 rounds.

April 6th

New shipment of imported delicacies just received at Bon Ton Grocery Co., Mr. Jos. Kemper, prop. Caviar, truffles, smoked turkey, pheasants & other meat.

May 9th

Con. Virginia has declared its first dividend of \$3 per month per share.

Malcolm did some quick figuring: 2,700 shares of Consolidated Virginia would yield him \$8,100 per month without touching his principal or selling a single share of stock.

May 26th

Virginia City was host to some very distinguished visitors yesterday. Cyrus W. Field, with family and friends, including Chas. Kingsley & other English visitors of note, visited the lower levels of Con. Virginia. They were much impressed, not only with the fabulous wealth disclosed underground, but also by the new, throatier cage. Those in the party who were mechanically minded showed great interest in the air compressors and machine drills which were installed earlier this month.

June 1st

Mr. Alfred Sutro will again be a candidate for the U. S. Senate, opposing Mr. William Sharon. Mr. Sutro is regarded by some as a genius and by some as a fool. His tunnel is slowly approaching the Lode, and there is much opposition to it. The mineowners seem to object to the fact that if the tunnel is ever completed, they will be forced to pay Mr. Sutro the sum of \$2 per ton of ore for the use of his tunnel.

June 11th

Messrs. Mackey, Fair, Flood & O'Brien have started the erection of a 60-stamp mill which will be located just below the Con. Virginia shaft. It will cost about \$300,000 to build and is expected to have a capacity of 260 tons per day. The firm is also planning to build a huge pan mill near the California shaft. The new milling firm will be known as the Pacific Mill & Mining Co. and will be operated as a private enterprise of Messrs. Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien.

July 6th

The management of the Ophir reports the discovery of a body of rich ore on its 1,465-foot level near the north line of the California. This would seem to justify the assumption that the Big Bonanza will extend clear through the California and into the Ophir.

LIX

ODDLY ENOUGH, IT WAS William Sharon, who cared for no one in the world other than himself, who indirectly precipitated Malcolm Douglas's personal crisis.

Ever since his defeat at the polls by Jones, Sharon had been determined to win a seat in the United States Senate. In the hectic year of 1874, he entered the race grimly determined to leave no stone unturned, no dollar unspent, in order to achieve his goal. And his first important step was to buy the *Enterprise* from Joe Goodman.

The *Enterprise* had been Sharon's implacable enemy, and the vitriolic pen of Editor Goodman had brought the dapper little financier endless annoyance and discomfiture. With the change of ownership, everything else changed. At first the public was amused; later, when there was no mighty pen to proclaim daily the iniquities of Mr. Sharon, his iniquities were forgotten.

Sharon did not stop with the buying of a newspaper. He was a careful, methodical planner, a dynamic little man with a Napoleonic assurance. He needed money, he needed prestige, and he needed to find ore to keep his mills busy. Quite logically, therefore, his choice fell on the Ophir.

It was on the very ground where the Ophir now stood that the original discoveries had been made in 1853, although they had not then been exploited or even recognized. Later, the Ophir had be

come one of the great mines. Now it appeared to be on the threshold of a new bonanza, a logical continuation of the fantastically rich drift that started at the Consolidated Virginia, extended north through the as yet unworked California, and gave promise of reaching into the Ophir.

It would all have been simple enough for so shrewd an operator as Sharon had not the control of the Ophir then been in the hands of E. J. (Lucky) Baldwin, one of the nerviest traders on the coast.

Sharon commenced his buying operations unobtrusively. On August 11, 1874, Ophir was quoted at \$20 per share, Consolidated Virginia at \$80, and California at half that price. A month later Ophir had increased in price almost three times. Consolidated Virginia had gone up to \$160, and California to \$90. As of that date, Malcolm's shares in the two bonanza mines gave him a gross wealth of \$573,750.

No one but William Sharon could have performed the miracle. By all the rules of stock values, the bonanza mines should have been the leaders in the market, and should have pulled other stocks up with them. Instead, it was Sharon's stubborn courage, his relentless exploitation of Ophir, which carried Consolidated Virginia and California up to the heights.

The bull market of late summer and early fall in 1874 surpassed anything ever before seen on the Comstock. Investors, many times burned—and naturally wary of any deal engineered by Sharon—flocked once again into the market like lambs begging to be slaughtered. It was Sharon whose efforts boosted the real bonanza stocks, Sharon who, by doing so, increased the value of Malcolm Douglas's holdings to more than half a million dollars, Sharon who indirectly caused Malcolm to study the situation and to decide that the moment had come that he had been waiting for, the moment when he could approach Althea in such financial grandeur that she could not resist him.

They lived in the same house and their rooms adjoined, but it was still difficult for Malcolm to find the time and seclusion he needed for his talk with her. He did not suspect that both Mom and Deborah knew what he had in mind and that they were quietly making it as difficult as possible for him. Althea, he figured, would know what he was planning. Althea would never be unmindful of the fact that he, Malcolm Douglas, was now worth more than half a million dollars and that, in addition, he had an income of \$8,100 per month.

The opportunity that Malcolm tried to create did not present itself. It came accidentally.

Malcolm had been with Mom on C Street one day when she had exclaimed with pleasure over a bolt of handsome taffeta which had just been put into the narrow, crowded window of one of the city's most expensive stores. He decided to present it to her, and, because he had left his job on the *Enterprise* with the change of ownership, he had plenty of time on his hands.

He had just completed his purchase when the bell over the door jangled to announce the arrival of another customer. The customer was Althea.

She looked young and lovely in a new woolen suit and a pert little hat. The clear, crisp air had given a brightness to her cheeks and a sparkle to her blue eyes. She saw Malcolm and came straight to him, holding out her hand in greeting as though they had not seen each other twice already that day, as though they did not see each other several times every day, as though they did not sleep within twenty feet of each other.

She said, "I declare, Malcolm Douglas, this is the very last place on earth I ever expected to find you. What are you doing here?"

He explained, and had the clerk open his purchase to display it for her. She clasped her hands. "Mom will be simply thrilled, Malcolm. You're the most *thoughtful* person."

The obvious effort she was making amused him. While the clerk rewrapped his bulky package, he drew Althea into a corner of the store where the fading light from outside and the dull glow of the gas jets imparted a feeling of intimacy. He said, "I've been trying to talk to you alone for a long time, Althea."

"Have you indeed? Why?"

"I thought you'd be interested in this."

He took a sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his coat. She was still gurgling with enthusiasm, but the eyes with which she studied the figures he showed her were calculating.

"Malcolm!" she breathed. "It's simply fantastic! To think of you having all that money."

"I'll have a good deal more than that," he told her. "Stocks are going much higher. I understand, too, that they're shortly going to raise the monthly dividend on Consolidated Virginia to \$10, and that not later than next spring they'll declare the same dividend on California. Do you realize what that will mean?"

"Oh! I couldn't. I just simply don't know anything about business."

He smiled tolerantly and said: "You don't have to act for me, Al

thea. Anyway, here's what it means: If each of those companies declares a \$10 a month dividend, and if I hold onto all my stock, I'll have a monthly income of \$42,750."

"My goodness! That simply isn't possible."

"It's not only possible, Althea. It's probable. It's almost a certainty."

Her eyes were shining. She looked up at him eagerly. "Whatever will you do with all that money, Malcolm?"

"I was planning," he said with cold deliberation, "to ask you to marry me."

For the merest fraction of an instant she held her breath. Then she said: "How you do go on, Malcolm Douglas. Don't you know I'm already married?"

His eyes never wavered from her, nor did his voice tremble. He was a man stating facts, making a cold business proposition.

"You don't have to stay married," he said. "You can get free from Logan any minute you choose."

He saw a light of fear flicker across her face. She said, "He'd be awful angry. . . ."

"Why?"

"He's in love with me."

"I was in love with you too. That didn't stop him from taking you away from me."

"That was different."

"How?"

Logan didn't know you were in love with me." She hesitated a moment and then said, "Are you? Now?"

"Look here, Althea," he answered. "There's only been one bond between us. We've been honest with each other. I'd like to keep things that way."

"Why, Malcolm, you're perfectly frightening. . . ."

"So don't start being coquettish. As to whether I'm in love with you, I don't know. I was. They tell me that love can take a lot of punishment and still survive."

Her eyes grew serious, and she said "I'd be honest, Malcolm, even though I don't know whether your masculine pride will stand it."

"Go ahead."

"I was in love with you . . . if a seventeen year-old girl can know just what that means. After we got to Virginia City, something happened to you. You had one talk with Logan about his old mine, and

from then on you did nothing. It was as though you were afraid of him—oh! I don't mean physically afraid. I mean, as though . . . well, you know what you told me about when you were young and lived on the plantation. . . ."

"Don't stop, Althea."

"I wasn't very proud of you then, Malcolm. It's only recently I've begun to get proud of you again."

"Because it looks as though I'm accumulating money?"

"You insist on putting things so they sound mean, don't you? All right, I'll admit that had a lot to do with it. But so did other things. You seemed to—well, to sort of grow up. You weren't all messed up in a lot of silly sentiment. It was as though you suddenly realized that life wasn't easy, that a man had to fight for what he wanted. So you developed a new strength, and I reckon I admired that."

"I think you have strength and luck all mixed up, Althea. It was mere luck that Big Cypress happened to adjoin the Consolidated Virginia property, luck that they wanted to include it in their holdings, luck that John Mackay made it possible for me to survive the assessments. Don't credit me with noble qualities I haven't got. There will be less to disappoint you later."

She said nervously: "Don't you think we'd better move on, Malcolm? The clerk is watching us. Maybe if we walked home together . . . well, nobody could think there was anything wrong about that, could they? We could walk all the way down C Street and look in the windows, and then back on the other side, then up Taylor Street together. But be sure not to look so serious, Malcolm."

He smiled and held the door open for her. "You think of everything, don't you, my precious, mercenary little darling?"

"Well, a lady's reputation . . ."

He laughed then, and was still laughing as they started their solemn tour of the store windows on C Street.

The narrow, crowded windows gave an impression of cheapness and tawdriness which was not, however, in accord with the facts. There were jewelry stores displaying stones of tremendous value, shops which were filled with expensive clothes and rare furs, uninspiring places which sold nothing but the choicest comestibles from the four corners of the world. They passed a milliner's shop where Althea paused to exclaim over two exquisite little bonnets which were perched on top of the boxes in which they had journeyed from Paris; she went into raptures over a necklace of diamonds and emeralds in a jewelry store, and peered through another window into a gaslit interior and admired a tremendous music box which had been

brought around the Horn from Switzerland and which was priced at \$22,000.

"Expensive things really excite you, don't they, Althea?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly, Malcolm. I don't want many of those things. What excites me is the thought of being able to afford them."

"And that brings us back to where we started. Would you like to marry me?"

She walked for perhaps half a block without answering. When she did speak, it was without looking up at him, as though she might be afraid of her own words. "You *have* changed, Malcolm; perhaps more than I like."

"What does that mean?"

"Don't you think it would be nice to leave me a little pride? Don't you think you ought to say at least one sentimental thing, just a word or two which would help me to make myself believe that—well, that whatever I did I'd be doing for love?"

"No, I don't think so." His voice was harsh. "I can't see where love has anything to do with it. It didn't bother you four years ago; I don't see why you should be so sensitive now."

"If you're not in love with me, why are you so anxious to marry me?"

"I didn't say I wasn't in love with you. I said I didn't know. I insinuated—and now I'll say it direct—that I don't trust you. I'll trust what you do, but not what you say. I've passed the day, Althea, when I allow myself the luxury of being inflated by fine words and fancy phrases. I figured you were one woman to whom I could talk straight. If I can't, then I was wrong all the way through."

"You haven't said why you want to marry me."

"Maybe it's a habit—this wanting to marry you. Maybe I merely want you and know I can't get you any other way."

"Thanks for the lovely compliment. And why not carry it farther? Why not admit that the principal reason you want me is that I belong to Logan?"

"Very well. I'll admit it."

"Why do you hate him so?"

He answered carefully. "I don't believe I really hate him, Althea. I wish it were that simple. What I hate is that he makes me feel inferior. The very fact that he doesn't try to make me feel that way is what does the trick. It's a feeling I don't want to live with, something I've got to escape from. It isn't enough for me to acquire things; I've got to get those things from Logan. I'm glad that the more I'm

getting wealthy from was named Big Cypress. That was the name of his plantation. I want his wife. I want to be so far on top of the heap that when I look down at him he'll know I'm doing it."

"So he'll look up to you: Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

She said with a brilliant flash of honesty: "You'll never get that, Malcolm. Logan will never look up to you. The most you can ever hope for is that you and he will look at each other from the same level."

He looked at her in quick surprise. "You're right, of course. And it's because you can be right like that—and have the courage to say so—that you attract me. And since you've been honest, may I also have that privilege?"

"Certainly."

"Do you love your husband?"

"I respect and admire him."

"If his mine had not been destroyed, if he were still wealthy, would you consider leaving him for me?"

"I don't know. He loves me, and I wouldn't want to hurt him if I could help it."

"But you would—if there were sufficient financial inducement?"

Her eyes were cold, level, and hard. "I might. But you'd better be sure, Malcolm, that you'd want a wife who came to you from another man—and for those reasons."

"Now you're angry." He laughed suddenly. "But you're still deliciously practical. I think we'd do very well together. The point to consider is, How are we to arrange it?"

Again she was silent. There crept into her mind a little doubt, a little fear. Malcolm Douglas was even more changed than she had suspected. And yet . . . The smile she flashed him was bright as the morning sun.

"You want us to face facts as they are, don't you, Malcolm?"

"Yes."

"You don't want to complicate your marriage-proposal with sentiment, do you? You don't want any hint of weakness to shake your confidence in yourself?"

"That's right."

"Very well, then." Her voice was brittle, reminding him somehow of the dry-as-dust tones of Mathew D. Clayton. "I'll say this in answer to your romantic approach: An income of \$43,000 a month is very attractive."

LX

WITH THEIR NEW understanding came a new hostility.

Althea had always faced herself squarely. Left alone, she would have analyzed the situation just as he had done, but there would not have been the embarrassment of emotional nudity. She would never have deluded herself about her own motives, but it would have been pleasant to be able to believe that Malcolm's courtship was motivated somewhat by devotion.

But Malcolm was granting her no such refuge. He wanted her partly because he had once been in love with her, but chiefly because she now belonged to Logan Berkeley. She had robbed him of his pride when she became the bride of another man, and he squaring the account by refusing to let her retain a single illusion about herself.

She would have liked to inquire about his feelings toward Deborah Cortland, but he had deprived her of even that slim satisfaction. To show interest in his feelings for Deborah would be to inject into their odd relationship a sentimental value he was rigidly excluding. She couldn't ask, and she couldn't know. All she knew was that, no matter how he felt toward Deborah, the emotion wasn't as strong as his desire to compel Logan to resent him. *That* was the answer. You do not resent your inferior. Resentment connotes equality. You may be annoyed by an inferior, you may even be angry with him - but you cannot resent him.

If a man steals your wife, however, you must acknowledge his stature. You may hate him (realizing that hate is only a superlative form of resentment); you may attempt to take his life; but you will never be merely annoyed.

Althea wondered whether Malcolm had analyzed his own emotions as thoroughly, as accurately, as she had done. And then she found herself wondering how he would feel about things if he took her away from Logan Berkeley and made her Mrs. Douglas? Would he look back from the heights of accomplishment and regret his move?

Fundamentally, Malcolm was a sentimentalist. Any man who

could feel so deeply, resent so bitterly, struggle so determinedly—any such man had a deep vein of sentiment. Well (and she smiled a secret little smile), she was no seventeen-year-old girl now. She had experienced the intimacies of marriage. She was confident of her power to make Malcolm—if he ever became her husband—believe that she loved him. And once she had made him believe that, she felt that they could find happiness.

They completed their round trip of C Street and turned up the hill on Taylor. They were a fine-looking, casual young couple, both blond, both healthy, both clear-skinned and bright-eyed in the tangy air of early fall. No casual observer could have suspected the nature of their conversation, nor the complexity of the emotions that harried them.

"I think," Malcolm said slowly, "that we should break the news to Logan as soon as possible."

She said, "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Hurting him. He deserves better."

"It has to happen sooner or later. Unless you've changed your mind about an income of \$40,000 a month being worth while."

She looked at him in sudden anger. "You don't have to be horrid, Malcolm."

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry. "Will you tell him, or shall I?"

"I don't know. Can't we wait a little?"

"Until I cash in my stock and have the money safely in the bank?"

"I don't mean that. I think I can trust you to protect your money. I suppose that's the real appeal you have for me." She was trying to match his brutality, trying to hurt him as he had hurt her. "I've never been through this before. I don't know whether it is the task of the wife to tell her husband she's through with him, or whether that job properly belongs to the man she plans to marry."

He said quietly, "I think we should both do it."

"You wouldn't want to miss it, would you, Malcolm?"

"No."

"Very well. We'll do it your way."

"When?"

She shrugged. "If you are to become my lord and master, perhaps you'd better set the time."

"This evening," he said promptly. "We'll borrow the parlor. We'll close the doors. It'll be cozy."

She nodded agreement, feeling cold and frightened.

They walked in silence the rest of the way. Just before they turned into the mansion, Malcolm touched her arm.

"Just think," he said with mock fervor. "We're almost engaged. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Wonderful," she agreed bitterly. "Think how happy we'll be: you and me and your bank account."

LXI

DINNER THAT NIGHT was a somber affair. Even an argument between the Professor and Brian Boru O'Mara which started out under full steam slowed down and then stopped for lack of an audience.

Mom, at the foot of the table, wasn't happy. She felt an unusual tension. She had noticed that Althea and Malcolm avoided each other's eyes, and she saw that Logan was making a distinct effort to be his natural self, thereby fooling no one except himself.

Deborah noticed it too, and several times her eyes met Mom's. Once she raised her eyebrows interrogatively, and Mom conveyed her bewilderment with an almost imperceptible shrug and shake of her head.

What lightness Althea displayed during the meal was forced. Her smile was too bright, her laughter too gay. Between times she toyed with her food. Logan merely seemed puzzled.

Malcolm went about his dinner as though determined to prove that no matter what was going on, it could not affect the routine of his life. But within him there was a sense of impending drama, of uncertainty, of doubt.

Tonight would be the culmination of something for him, and now that it was at hand he wasn't quite sure what it was. He refused to take stock of himself or of the situation, yet the scene with Althea that afternoon had been considerably less than satisfactory.

He thought back over it, and felt that the blame had been his. After all, he could have been more gentle, he could have maintained a pretense of long-denied love. He didn't know why he had insisted on being brutal, why he had paid her the doubtful compliment of compelling her to hear the truth and to speak the truth. He had known that she would say Yes, and he had wanted to impress her with the realization that he was not the callow, fatuous young man who had arrived in Virginia City six years before. In an odd,

perverse sort of way, he had thought that she would admire his display of ruthlessness; and that in itself surprised him too, because actually he hadn't thought that her admiration made too much difference. He had believed that the be-all and end-all of his campaign was to take Althea away from Logan. That he now found himself coveting a gentler emotion amazed him.

And so he struggled through the meal, not content with the afternoon, not at peace with himself, not experiencing quite the anticipatory thrill he'd expected at the prospect of the impending interview. It was Logan again, he told himself angrily: No matter what he did where Logan was concerned, the result was never what he had planned.

They finished dinner. The Professor and Brian Boru O'Mara left the house with the avowed intention of fortifying themselves with whisky so that they could resume, and enjoy, the argument which had stumbled and fallen during the dinner.

Logan looked around the parlor. It was the same grotesque room it had been on the night they'd first seen it: the same fantastic wood carving over the mantel, the same too rich draperies, too elaborate furnishings.

Logan looked at his wife, who was sitting primly on the horsehair sofa; at Malcolm who was gazing intently at the logs which crackled in the fireplace; at Mom, who seemed uncertain, and at Deborah Cortland, who displayed her curiosity without saying a word. At length Logan said, "Althea and Malcolm and I want to have a little talk, Mom . . . if you don't mind."

Mom said, "I know. . . ." She gathered her crocheting and stood up. Deborah joined her, and they went upstairs together.

Logan walked across the room and closed the hall door. He went to the dining room and pulled the sliding doors. He stopped at a little marble-topped table long enough to select a fresh cigar, clip the end from it, light it meticulously so that it burned evenly, and then he went to the fireplace and stood looking down at them.

"Well?" There was a slight, polite smile under Logan's mustache, just above the old saber scar.

Malcolm said, "Logan, I don't know just how to begin . . ."

"That's quite obvious."

"I hope there will be no misunderstanding."

Logan bowed slightly, saying nothing. But Althea, watching closely and knowing her husband, had seen the pupils of his eyes contract as though for the first time he suspected the purpose of their three-way interview.

Malcolm was left alone in the midst of a conversational vacuum. The scene had been carefully staged, almost too carefully; what had been planned as intimacy had suddenly become a grotesque formality. Once again it was Logan who dominated things, when that was the role Malcolm had selected for himself. He felt futile and angry, and he let the latter emotion take over.

"Althea and I want to get married," he said.

Logan did not move. His eyes focused on his wife's bent head. He looked from her to Malcolm.

"I suppose," he said, "that you two have talked it over."

Malcolm nodded, still saying nothing. Logan looked at Althea.

"You are in accord with Malcolm, my dear?"

The top of her head moved affirmatively.

"May I inquire when this great love overwhelmed you both?"

Malcolm said, "We were in love with each other before Althea ever met you."

"Interesting. And since then?"

"We never discussed it. Until this afternoon."

Logan moved to the couch and put his hand on Althea's arm. "Stand up, dear," he said gently. "I'm sure you'll feel less uncomfortable." She stood up in response to the pressure on her elbow. Logan was still smiling. "Suppose you speak for yourself, Althea. Would you like to get rid of me and marry Malcolm?"

"I - I think so."

"But it's hardly a question about which one should be in doubt, is it? Surely you have a definite feeling, or you wouldn't have consented to this delightful little conversation."

She met his eyes steadily, though in hers, there was a furtive flicker of guilt. "I've tried my best, Logan. I don't believe you can criticize me as a wife."

"Of course not. You've been delightful. Lovely, enthusiastic, and full of little surprises. But never more surprising than right now."

"I here were times," she said uncertainly, "when I thought that you

"I've never been too observant, Althea. And I've always possessed the rare ability to trust my wife implicitly."

"There has been nothing wrong," she flared, glad of a chance to defend herself.

"Of course not. I doubt if even I could have been kept in the dark if there had been. There are limits to my blindness and stupidity."

"Logan: . . . please . . ."

"Life is full of oddities, isn't it?" He was addressing the two of

them, concentrating on neither. "Or should I say coincidences? For instance, it was a coincidence, wasn't it, Althea, that when I was wealthy you fell madly in love with me? And when I became a somewhat glorified day laborer and Malcolm became rich, your love just happened to transfer to him? I wouldn't insult you, of course, by suggesting that your devotion has a mercenary slant. Or would it insult you?"

Anger was beginning to come to Althea's aid. She said, "You're making it very difficult, Logan."

"I'm terribly sorry. My most profuse apologies. Of course, I might remind you that I am not enjoying this too much, either. At least you two had the opportunity of planning in advance, while I have had to adjust myself. Rather swiftly, I might say."

Logan's cigar had gone out. He lighted it again with maddening deliberateness, as though there were no more important task in the world.

"Naturally," he said softly, "I would not hold a wife against her will. I'm afraid that even I could not continue to delude myself under those circumstances. But before relinquishing my marital rights, I believe I am justified in asking a few questions. And," he finished with a sudden hint of iciness (creeping through the suavity of his manner, "requesting honest answers."

He turned to Malcolm, moving quite close to him.

"You must be quite proud of yourself," he said.

Gray eyes stared into black ones. Malcolm was angry too, but as yet Logan had given his anger no opportunity to flare.

"Do you believe Althea loves you?"

"That," answered Malcolm stiffly, "is our business."

"Perhaps. But, as her husband, it would seem that I have a right to inquire." Logan made an elaborate gesture. "You might consider it my one remaining conjugal right."

Malcolm said, "I believe she loves me."

"And always has?"

"That may be. I don't know."

Althea was watching her husband closely. What she saw frightened her. It was something in Logan's eyes, in his manner, in the tense, coiled-spring wariness of his pose. She saw the danger signals, and she didn't believe that Malcolm saw them. She wanted to warn him, and knew that she could not. Logan was too polite, too suave, too generous. That wasn't his way. His smile frightened her. It was a brilliant smile, as the sparks from a lighted fuse are brilliant.

"Do you think you're getting a very good bargain, Malcolm?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you don't. I forgot that you are the gentle, sentimental type, that your mind doesn't run in commercial channels. So I'll explain. When a man buys something, he should convince himself that what he's getting is worth the price he is required to pay. Is that clearer?"

Malcolm's voice was trembling. "I won't have you talking that way—"

"About the woman you expect to marry? How chivalrous! But then, you see, she happens to be the woman I have already married."

Malcolm said angrily, "You're making a farce out of something serious, Logan."

"No, indeed, I'm making something serious out of a farce."

"How clever of you! Logan Berkeley, master of words! It's a new role for you, and it doesn't become you."

"Perhaps not, Malcolm. Unfortunately, you haven't the capacity to judge me very well. You could have been quite a fine person, you know—"

"If you hadn't cheated me out of my share of the Rattlesnake mine."

Logan's eyes narrowed to pinpoints. "Careful, Malcolm. I don't like that word."

"You cheated me—"

That was as far as he got. Althea had known that it would happen—that it had to happen.

Logan's reaction was swift, instinctive, and deadly. His fist lashed out and crashed against the side of Malcolm's face.

It was a sudden blow, delivered with all the strength of a man who has been outraged. Malcolm staggered back against a little table. It overturned with a crash, and an unlighted lamp fell to the floor and smashed to bits.

A great calm came over Malcolm, a great sense of achievement.

"For that," he said coldly, "I shall insist on having satisfaction."

Logan bowed formally. "At your service," he said.

"I will send my second."

Again Logan bowed.

"A duel?"

"Precisely."

"I shall accept your challenge," said Logan. "It will be a great pleasure to kill you."

He bowed again to Malcolm, made a slight, mocking bow in the direction of his wife, walked through the door, through the hall, and into the street.

Malcolm stood still for a moment. Then he, too, turned and left the room. He walked upstairs.

Althea, alone in the parlor, stood motionless. The color had gone from her cheeks, and a great new fear came to her.

"Oh, God!" she said. "They're going to fight a duel. If Logan kills him, I'll have nothing left."

LXII

NEVER HAD MALCOLM expected to see Mathew D. Clayton excited. There was an absurd sort of satisfaction in having shaken the little financier from his icy calm, his sardonic aloofness.

Clayton was acting like an ordinary, everyday, irate human being. He paced up and down his private office, the one with the two little windows looking down on C Street. He walked with short, precise steps, making his turns at identical spots, like a sentry.

"Preposterous!" he burst out at length "A duell!"

His reaction was so explosive, so unexpected, that Malcolm was enjoying himself.

"Nevertheless," said Malcolm, "that's the way it is."

"But you can't! It's impossible."

"I'm afraid you're wrong for once, Mathew."

"The thing is illegal."

Malcolm smiled with real humor. "So it is," he said gently. "And since when did something illegal give you pause?"

Clayton stopped his nervous pacing. "All right, then. Forget the illegality. We'll admit that duels have been fought in Nevada, that they're even winked at, that nothing actually has been done to stop them, or ever will be done. I'll say this then: it's damned foolishness."

"Why?"

"A relic of days that are gone. A silly importation from the land of chivalry. Chivalry, hell! You and Logan Berkeley fight. What do you prove? that one of you can shoot better than the other."

"There's a small question of honor."

Clayton made a gesture of disgust. "Honor! The man got justifiably angry. He hit you. If you had hit back, there would have been a first-class fight. A little blood, a broken bone or two, and everything would have been over. But now you damned Southerners can't leave it at that. You've got to go out and shoot each other. You've

got to dramatize it. And you want me to be your second. Well, I refuse."

"Very well." Malcolm's voice was quiet, his eyes still slightly amused. "I'll have no trouble finding a second. Some miner, perhaps, who will regard it as a fine show, a bit of novel entertainment. He won't be very dignified or impressive, but if I have to use him . . ."

Clayton said cannily, "Suppose Logan is willing to apologize?"

"He won't be. And if he were, I should refuse to accept his apology."

Clayton seated himself suddenly. He sat staring at Malcolm across the top of his desk. His eyes grew thoughtful, and he spoke evenly in his dry, brittle voice. "There's more to this than a mere quarrel," he stated. "What is it?"

A faint flush showed on Malcolm's cheeks, and he refrained from answering.

"Why," probed Clayton, "is it so important for you to meet Logan Berkeley on what romanticists are pleased to call 'the field of honor'?"

Malcolm opened his lips to explain, then closed them. It was the one thing he couldn't explain. It was something he understood, but that no one else could possibly understand. You couldn't tell a sane, normal man that this thing was an achievement, that by looking at a man down the barrel of a gun you would have at last achieved an absolute equality, which you had always wanted more than anything else in the world.

It didn't make sense. You didn't have to shoot a man, or to stand motionless and smiling while he shot you, to prove that you were his equal. Clayton would argue that by following this silly procedure, you would have proved an equality of courage but that you wouldn't have proved anything else.

And Mathew D. Clayton, for once in his life, would be wrong. He'd be right for almost everybody else, but not for Malcolm Douglas. It wasn't a question of courage. It was a lot deeper than that, a remembrance of the old dueling code, a knowledge that no gentleman ever demeaned himself by meeting an inferior. This Malcolm knew: When they faced each other with pistols in their hands and death impending, they would—for that brief moment—be equals, and nothing ever could change that.

Malcolm smiled briefly at the thought of what Clayton, with his sharp, logical mind, would answer if he could know what Malcolm was thinking. Mathew would argue that the minute Logan Berkeley accepted the challenge, he had acknowledged Malcolm's equality. The logic was unassailable, unanswerable. And it was wrong. This

thing had to be removed from the realm of theory and be made actual.

Malcolm had not planned the duel. He had never considered physical combat with Logan Berkeley. A brawl would have been demeaning to both of them. A shooting-on-sight would have been spectacular but inconclusive, except that of course one of them might be killed. Beyond that, it would have accomplished nothing. The idea of a duel had flashed upon him at the instant he had staggered under the impact of Logan's fist. There had been no such idea . . . and then, there it was, full grown. It was the perfect answer to the feeling which had obsessed him.

No, he told Clayton quietly, he would not accept any offer to call off the duel. He said: "It's getting late. We should meet tomorrow. Will you act for me or not?"

Mathew Clayton knew men; he realized he was whipped. He said he'd act for Malcolm. He made one last plea:

"Look at what you've got to lose," he argued. "You're wealthy. You're going to be wealthier. You're still young. You call this man your enemy, so let us presume he is your enemy. You've seen him tumble from the high places. You watched him lose his mine and his fortune. You saw him turn from gentleman to common laborer. You've arranged to take from him the last thing of value he possesses: his wife. Isn't that enough?"

Malcolm regarded his friend steadily. "No," he said, "it isn't enough."

Beyond that, he refused to go. Clayton sighed. He rose and reached for his coat and hat. He said, "Do you know where I'll find him?"

"He left the house. You might find him at the Chollar-Potosi offices. Or he may have gone back home."

"You'll wait here?"

"I'll wait." As Clayton opened the door, Malcolm said, "Try to arrange it for tomorrow morning."

"Dawn, I presume!" There was a sarcastic edge to Clayton's question.

"Not necessarily. Any time that suits him. He was challenged. He has the choice."

Mathew D. Clayton left, slamming the door. Malcolm, suffused by an odd contentment, a sense of achievement which was almost absurd, seated himself at Clayton's desk. He found foolscap, ink, and pen. He concentrated on what he had learned of legal phraseology. Then, steadily, effortlessly, he began to write: *

I, Malcolm Douglas, formerly of South Carolina, but at present a resident of Virginia City, State of Nevada, being sound of mind and body, do hereby make and declare this as and for my last Will & Testament, revoking all other wills and codicils thereto heretofore made by me.

I direct that my funeral expenses and all just debts shall be paid.

The rest and residue of my estate, real, personal, and mixed, in possession, remainder, or expectancy, shall be distributed on a basis of percentages of the whole, in the following manner.

To my uncle, Bruce Douglas, last known to me to be a resident of the City of New York, State of New York, if he shall still be living, a sum equal to 10 per cent.

To Deborah Cortland, spinster, now a resident of Virginia City, in token of my great respect and friendship, a sum equal to 10 per cent.

The remaining 80 per cent, free of all encumbrance totally and in fee, I give, devise, and bequeath, with my deep affection, to (Mrs) Anna Schultz Carmichael, wife of Brutus Carmichael, for her own personal property or to dispose of as she deems best.

And I hereby designate the said Anna Schultz Carmichael sole executor of my estate, with full powers as such, and without necessity for bond or accounting.

Malcolm paused for a moment, then wrote the attestation for the requisite three witnesses. He wasn't sure whether Nevada demanded three witnesses or two, but it would be safe to make it three, and they could be obtained easily enough when Mathew Clayton returned so that they could sign, solemnly and formally, ". . . in the presence of the Testator, and at his request, and in the presence of each other . . ."

Shortly after eleven o'clock Mathew D. Clayton returned. He looked hurried, disappointed, and a trifle bewildered. He was carrying under his arm a handsome, heavy leather case which he placed carefully on the desk.

"Tomorrow morning at eleven," he stated disgustedly. "At a designated spot in Six-Mile Canyon. And I wish to go on record as stating that I have achieved the impossible. I have just talked to a man who is a bigger damn fool than you are."

Malcolm nodded and smiled "Who is acting for him?" he inquired.

"I am."

"You?"

"Yes. If Mathew D. Clayton, who, until tonight, foolishly regarded himself as reasonably sane."

Malcolm frowned: "That's impossible," he said. "Two duelists can not have the same second."

"You and Berkeley have. At first he refused to name a second. Then he laughed and selected me. Laughed, mind you. You'd think this was a political rally, not a duel."

I though Malcolm was first annoyed, then angered, there was obviously nothing to be gained by argument. Nevertheless, just the faintest edge had been taken from his mood of exaltation; the meeting had lost a fraction of its dignity.

"I'll drive by for you at ten o'clock in the morning," Clayton stated coldly. "Meanwhile"—he reached for the leather case he'd brought back to the office with him, and flipped the lid open—"Berkeley suggested that you examine these pistols. He said you were familiar with them."

Something wrenched at Malcolm, bringing a lump to his throat.

He was staring down at a pair of exquisite dueling pistols, superbly wrought, perfectly balanced.

Yes, he recognized them; yes, he knew them. Scarcely knowing that he spoke, he said, "Logan and I used to practice with these when we were kids. . . ."

Malcolm's gray eyes took on a softer light. He looked back beyond the years, beyond Virginia City, beyond the war; back to a glade of cypress and black gum and live oak, a glade which in springtime was brilliant and fragrant with jasmine and azalea and japonica and honeysuckle and magnolia; back to a scene of ineffable peace and beauty, and to a pair of youngsters, one fifteen and named Malcolm Douglas, one a year older and named Logan Berkeley.

"Being a good shot isn't enough," the boy Logan was explaining. "Your nerves have got to be steady as iron. We'll use this little pine tree as a target."

He took a hunting hatchet and notched the tree head high.

"That's about the width of a man's body. You stand back to back. You walk away from each other the designated number of paces. At the signal, you turn and face each other. You keep your hand down, the pistol along your leg. The judge gives the word: 'Ready, gentlemen!' and you both nod. Then he says, 'Fire! One! Two! Three! Halt!' You may fife between the word 'Fire' and the word 'Halt!' Don't hurry your shot, a thousandth of a second may mark the difference between perfect aim and missing. Remember that these pistols have hair triggers. . . . I'll try it first."

Logan had stood solemnly with his back against the pine, and Malcolm, acting as judge, had supervised the pacing, though of twice the number of steps, since the tree could not walk. Then he had ordered Logan to turn, had asked whether he was ready, had said in a voice not quite steady: "Fire! One! Two! Three! Halt!" Except

that he got no farther than the word "Fire," because Logan's pistol cracked and the bullet imbedded itself in the young pine tree at just about the height of a man's heart.

It was Malcolm's turn then, and he, too, was calm and swift and deadly accurate. They practiced until they ran out of ammunition, and the total of all their efforts could have been covered by a silver dollar.

They returned to the huge white house at Big Cypress bright-eyed and excited, boyishly delighted. That was the first time, but there were many other times; and it was fun, more fun than any other game they played; more fun than hunting or fishing or riding; and they became known as the deadliest dueling shots in the country, and the swiftest, without ever fighting a duel to prove it.

The Berkeley dueling pistols, pride of Colonel Sumter Berkeley's heart, pistols with which men had been killed under the live oaks, pistols with which delicate points of honor had been settled, pistols which were thought to have passed their usefulness and which had been deemed fit only to become family heirlooms.

They had been buried during the war, along with a few other things of greater sentimental value than money or family silver: Colonel Berkeley's Mexican War cavalry saber, an exquisite miniature of Mrs. Carolina Ravenel Berkeley, mother of Logan, and of Edward and Austin who were now dead. Those mementos and no others Logan had brought West with him.

It came back all so clearly to Malcolm: the peace, the quiet, the beauty, the utter tranquillity of Big Cypress as he had known it as a boy; the laughter and gaiety with which he and Logan had perfected themselves; the feeling that if ever they were called upon to prove themselves, they would be equal to the task.

And on the morrow, here in the ugly, barren, harsh land of Nevada, the two boys—grown to manhood now—would face each other. And in the hand of each would be one of the pistols which they had regarded as little more than playthings.

LXIII.

ALTHEA LAY ALONE in the big bed, staring at the fire, staring at the ceiling, staring at the tips of her fingers, staring everywhere except into her own conscience.

She looked tiny and lovely and helpless as she rested against the

pillows with her blond hair cascading about her shoulders. She knew she looked seductive and appealing because she had arranged to be so. But she was finding it difficult to retain the tremulous smile, the dewy eyes, the contrite expression. She had been rehearsing now for more than two hours, and it was becoming rather pointless.

She was frightened. The monster she had created threatened to destroy her. Men, she reflected, were ridiculously unpredictable.

Of course, she had anticipated an argument, a scene even. She wouldn't have been too surprised if there had been a fight. But a duel! Logan and Malcolm facing each other with loaded pistols, both deadly shots, both fearless. It was senseless, overly dramatic, unfair.

That one of the two would be killed she regarded as a certainty, and for the first time in her life she rebelled against acknowledging her feelings. She thought around the facts, considering the effect upon her, whatever the result might be.

If Malcolm survived, she had a feeling that the killing of Logan would exact its toll and that he would blame her—not directly, of course, but by inference.

If Malcolm did not survive . . . In that event she would have lost everything: Logan and what little he still possessed and so generously gave, Malcolm and the luxuries she coveted. She had one hope and one hope only. It was slim and forlorn, but she had set the stage well for it in case Logan happened to return to his room that night. Her plan was, by any means at her command, to dissuade him.

She had planned her attempt down to the tiniest detail. She would be meek, contrite, sorrowful, worried, solicitous. She would promise anything . . . whether or not she intended to keep the promise. Anything to prevent this duel at this time. Postpone it, alter the present plans, and it might never take place. It was too grandiloquent, too preposterous. She would try tears and cajolery; she would try all the artifices of sex; she would humble herself or abandon herself or do whatever was necessary to blend with his mood, anything to induce him to accede to her wishes.

But her room was empty, her bed was empty—save for herself. She felt an angry frustration, a sense of having been cheated. To what purpose had she prepared herself so lavishly rehearsed so meticulously, planned so carefully? She knew she had never looked lovelier or more desirable, nor had she ever been so eager to use lavishly the weapons of her sex.

She listened intently to each footstep in the street, to the occasional creak of carriage wheels and rattle of harness, to the voices of men coming faintly through the closed windows. She even hoped that

Logan might reel home drunk and that she could utilize his stupor as an excuse to postpone the silly duel, and then perhaps to have it called off altogether.

Obviously he wasn't coming. The knowledge gave her an infuriating sense of inadequacy, of helplessness. No plan would succeed, no artifice work, because there would be no chance. She clenched her fists and rolled over so that her face was buried in the pillows. She cried, and if her tears were born of futility, they were none the less genuine.

And it was while she was crying that Logan returned.

She did not hear him until he entered their room and closed the door behind him. Then, startled, she turned and lay looking up at him, tears streaming down her cheeks, hair disheveled, her lovely body still shaken with sobs. She looked infinitely prettier than she had planned to look because her grief had been genuine, her surprise, real, the startled light in her eyes unaffected.

She sat up straight, the comforter and blankets falling away. She was wearing the sheerest of linen nightgowns, and her full young breasts were limned clearly in the firelight. She stared at her husband for a few seconds, and then emotion overcame her and she said,

"Oh! you . . ." and threw herself once more face down on the pillows, her body racked by fresh paroxysms.

Logan stared at her in puzzlement. He had been prepared for anything but this. Had he entered a half hour earlier he would have recognized the cleverness with which she had set her own little domestic stage, and would merely have been amused. But this! He could not know that the primary cause of her grief had been anger rather than love, that her concern had been for herself rather than for him.

She could not have planned better. Sincerity was the one thing he had not expected to encounter. He looked down at her, more than a trifle bewildered.

He, too, had planned for this scene, and he, too, was nonplused by the course it was taking. He felt sorrow and pity. He remembered that he had been deeply in love with his wife, and that—unfortunately—he was still in love with her. In midlife, he reached down and touched her bare shoulder.

A wail came up to him from the pillows. "Go away!" she cried. "Don't touch me!"

Perversely, being a man, he seated himself beside her. He tried to remember all of the things he had planned to say and do, tried to resurrect his dignity, tried to don once again the mantle of the injured husband. Somehow, nothing he could think of fitted the

situation. He kept his voice as steady as possible so that he might not betray how shaken he was, and said, "You mustn't carry on that way, Althea."

She turned slowly and lay looking up at him. She said, "Oh! Logan . . ." and began crying again.

He made awkward, fumbling efforts to soothe her. Oddly enough, he was on the defensive. Nothing that she was doing or saying seemed calculated for the simple reason that it had not been calculated.

He stroked her shoulder, astounded that even now he should get a violent reaction from the mere touching of her bare flesh. Little by little she quieted. The crying stopped almost entirely, and she lay staring at him out of wide blue eyes, dabbing at her tears with a wispy bit of lace handkerchief.

He said, "I'll confess I'm surprised, Althea."

Anger, beyond control, and not at all the kind of anger she had planned to simulate if necessary, flared within her.

"Why should you be surprised?" she demanded. "Why is it surprising that a woman should worry when her husband might be killed?"

"Her husband?" The faintest suggestion of a smile touched his lips. "Haven't you got the emotional values slightly twisted?"

"No! No, I haven't! And you needn't talk that fancy kind of way, either. I don't care what has been said, or how big a fool I've been. You are my husband, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"It has happened, though," he reminded her. "It happened this evening."

"But I didn't know . . ."

"Of course you didn't know, my dear. It never occurred to you that I might love you enough to want to kill the man who was about to take you from me. It never occurred to you that he might love you enough to wish to kill me."

"But you can't fight a duel over me. I'm not worth it."

"Probably you're not."

"And he's your friend."

"He has a surprising way of proving it."

"I'm telling the truth. I—I practically sought him."

"Are you inviting me to kill you, Althea?"

"I don't care what you do to me." She was vehement about it, knowing that she was safe with him. "I deserve anything, I suppose. Call off this duel . . . please. I'll promise anything."

"You promised . . . once. You promised to be an affectionate, faithful, dutiful wife until death did us part. Well," he shrugged, "the laws of chance being what they are, it is possible that you may

soon have the privilege of considering that you *almost* kept that promise."

She saw his eyes: not angry, not excited, but cold and determined. She knew she was beaten.

"You're going through with it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning—this morning—at eleven. In Six-Mile Canyon."

"Why did you come home now?"

"To change clothes. And to bid you a fond and courteous farewell."

Her voice was tight. She said, "Will you do me one last favor, Logan?"

"What is it?"

"Will you sleep with me tonight?"

He smiled broadly and shook his head. "Ah, no, my dear. I'm far too conscious of your witchery. Even in my new, inglorious role of husband about-to-be-betrayed, I should be afraid to trust myself in bed with you."

She said, "It's not that way, Logan. Maybe I was thinking something like that an hour ago, but not now."

He saw the rare flash of honesty in her face, a thing that he had observed seldom and that always surprised him.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"Tonight," she said, "I want you with me. I'm afraid to be alone."

He nodded, then turned away quickly so that she might not see his eyes. He undressed, blew out the lamp, and slipped into bed beside her.

Easily, naturally, he put his arms about her, and her body, soft and warm, pressed close against his. And in that way they lay quietly, motionlessly, saying nothing, doing nothing.

Eventually they slept: the husband who still loved his wife, and the wife who knew that within a matter of a few brief hours she might be a widow.

LXIV

MALCOLM WAS IN HIS ROOM when he heard Logan return to the house. His lips twisted into a sour grin. Logan and Althea, husband and wife, separated from him by a narrow wall.

He was surprised at the condition of his own nerves. He had undressed and put on a robe. Eventually the chill of the room cut through to his bones, and he shivered. He doffed the robe and climbed into bed, where he lay staring at the ceiling.

He was unafraid. The peculiar feeling of exaltation was still with him. But he knew that he could not—would not—sleep.

He heard muffled footsteps padding down the hall. He did not know that it was Mom and that she let herself into Deborah Cortland's room.

Deborah was huddled over a tiny fire which flickered in the tiny grate. She looked up at Mom and smiled. "This is a fantastic household tonight, Mom. Is everybody awake?"

"I think so." Mom drew a wicker chair close to Deborah's. "I've talked to Malcolm," she said. "He won't budge."

Deborah waited.

"You've got to do something," Mom said.

"What?"

"Anything. I don't care what. You're in love with Malcolm. You can't let him go out tomorrow and get killed. Or kill, for that matter."

"Just what can I do about it?"

Mom met Deborah's eyes steadily. "I don't know," she answered. "But whatever you do will be more than justified."

Deborah said: "Nothing I might do would help. I know Malcolm."

"Will you know him tomorrow night?"

Deborah straightened in her chair, a sudden fear in her eyes. "I hadn't thought of it in that way," she confessed. "Is he in his room now?"

"Yes."

"I'll do my best."

Mom rose and kissed Deborah on the forehead. "God bless you," she said. "You're the finest woman I've ever known."

When Deborah opened the door of Malcolm's room, her heart was pounding. At first she saw nothing, her eyes unaccustomed to the gloom. She heard Malcolm's voice from the bed. He said, "Deborah!" and his tone betrayed surprise.

"Don't get up," she said. "I want to talk to you."

She groped through the darkness, found his bed, and seated herself. She said quietly, "Even if you survive, Malcolm, it won't bring you the peace you're seeking."

"You shouldn't be in here, Deborah."

"Worried about my morals? They're not important, really. How long have you known that I'm in love with you, Malcolm?"

'In love— Don't be absurd, Deborah. You're trying to persuade me not to fight this duel and—'

"I'd do anything in the world to prevent it, Malcolm. Even to sacrificing my chastity. It's worth that much to me because I love you."

Malcolm felt a sense of panic. He was afraid of her, more afraid now than ever before. He had never let himself analyze his feelings toward her lest they cause him to swerve from the course he had elected to follow. He started to remonstrate, to drive her from the room. But before he could find the right words, she had slipped off her robe and had slid under the covers with him.

She was trembling violently, and the hand she put in his was cold as ice. "I'm offering myself," she said unsteadily, "if you'll call off this absurd thing you're planning to do. There will be no strings attached. Go ahead and marry your Althea. Logan won't try to hurt her. Perhaps you'll even be happy."

Her body stretched rigidly beside his. She said tremulously, "You're not making it very easy for me, Malcolm. I've never played a seduction scene before. I don't quite know how to go about it."

He was suddenly overwhelmed by an emotion he could not understand. He turned hungrily and caught her in his arms, drawing her close against him, unaware of his strength, unaware that he was hurting her.

He didn't try to understand why he was doing this, why—unaccountably—he felt as though he'd like to cry, to enjoy the luxury of weakness, to unburden himself in the darkness as a man can unburden himself only to a woman.

"Say it, Malcolm," she urged with rare understanding and tenderness. "For once, be honest with me and with yourself."

He fought for a long time before the dam broke. Then, hesitantly, he began to talk.

"You shouldn't have done this, Deborah," he said. "It's no good for either of us, it's something we'll both wish had never happened."

"Go ahead, Malcolm."

"I love you. You know I love you." His voice was harsh and bitter. "But this is something bigger than love. Tonight I'll speak truthfully, and tomorrow I will lie to myself and say that it was not true. You've earned the right to know, so I'll say it again. I love you. I've loved you for a long time. I'll say it again and again and again. I love you as I never thought I could love anybody."

She lay there tense and expectant. She did not cry out when his embrace hurt her, nor did she try to draw away. She waited for the

kisses that did not come, for the sexual approach he did not make. He clung to her in desperation, as though never to let her go. Then, after a long time, his emotional storm passed, his voice steadied . . . and she knew that she had lost.

"I'm going to marry Althea," he said. "If I still live after tomorrow morning, I shall marry her even though I love you. You have been as brave and as generous as only you can be, but it's no use. What is about to happen cannot be changed: I wouldn't change it if I could. Go back to your room, please. Go now. And try to forget what has happened and what I have said."

She lay quietly beside him. She was too honest to despise herself for what she had done. The desire that had consumed her a few minutes previously now flowed out of her limbs, and she lay passively, knowing now—knowing to the full—that she did not have the power to break through his determination.

It was he who was embarrassed, he who was apologetic. He started to say something, but she put her fingers gently over his lips, and said, "I understand, Malcolm."

"You understand what?"

"That you're not being chivalrous, really. You'd take me—which is what I planned—except that you're afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. That tomorrow your conscience would begin to hurt, and you'd feel compelled to ask me to marry you."

He was silent, and after a while she spoke again. "It isn't Althea you're thinking about," she said. "It's Logan. I can't quite understand why you feel as you do, but I know you do. My gesture hasn't made the slightest impression in your determination, has it?"

He was silent.

"I'll go," she went on. "It's nice to have been in bed with you."

He caught the bitterness in her voice, and cried, "Deborah! Don't—"

"The thing you regard as strength, Malcolm, isn't strength at all. It's weakness. But that is your business, and it will have to remain yours. I'm sorry."

She slipped out from under the blankets and put on her robe. She touched his cheek and said, "Good night, Malcolm."

He saw her shadowy figure cross the room, watched the door close behind her, and he lay rigidly, feeling more alone than ever before in his life.

Mom heard the opening and closing of Malcolm's door. She saw Deborah walk down the hall to her own room, and followed her.

Deborah was standing near the foot of the bed when Mom entered. Her eyes were deeply, astonishingly black, her hands clenched into tiny, futile fists. The laugh she flung across the room was brittle and mocking. She said, "He didn't want what I had to offer, Mom."

The two women gazed at each other. Mom's clear, gentle eyes saw far below the surface. She said, "He's still determined to go through with it?"

"Yes. He's in a consecrated mood. There's nothing so important to him as killing Logan Berkeley or being killed by him; there's nothing that means so much to him as Logan Berkeley's wife. Not Althea, mind you—but Logan's wife. He's a fanatic and a fool—"

"And, unfortunately, you love him."

"Yes, I love him. Not for his restraint tonight. I hate him for that. I feel—" She made an abrupt, angry gesture. "I was going to say I feel cheap, but I'm not going to add dishonesty to my brazenness. I don't feel cheap at all. I'm disappointed. I don't despise myself for the effort I made, but because I failed."

Mom walked slowly to the girl and put out her arms. She held Deborah closely, and the girl relaxed bit by bit. And then Deborah was clinging to the older woman and crying; not bravely, not bitterly, but with deep anguish. All her calmness, her poise, her courage, had evaporated; she needed the comfort and understanding which she found in Mom's arms and against Mom's ample breast.

Mom was talking softly, as one would talk to a hurt child: "You've done all you could, Deborah. But we won't give up. Tomorrow morning we'll drive out there, you and I—hoping that at the very last minute we might accomplish the impossible." She looked down at Deborah's tear-stained face. "I'll stay in here with you tonight, Deborah."

"No." The girl smiled wanly "For tonight, Mom, I'd rather be alone. It seems—well, more appropriate."

. LXV

SIX-MILE CANYON stretched eastward from Virginia City, an ugly, barren ravine twisting between ugly barren mountains. It lay far beyond the end of Taylor Street, out beyond the hoisting works and dumps of the bonanza mines, beyond the flimsy, tawdry Lower

Town; beyond the lovely and dignified church of St. Mary's-in-the-Mountains.

The brilliant sun of the late October day traveled westward, having made its journey across the desert, having touched the Humboldt Sink, having crowned the formidable peaks of the Flowery and Washoe ranges with brief moments of golden glory.

The canyon itself was mottled light and shadow. The old trail showed here and there, although already it had begun to be a relic of the past, its usefulness remembered only by Comstock veterans. Now there were railroads; now there was no further necessity for the dangerous journey by wagon across a vast area which had been devastated by nature. It was a grim place, a harsh and unyielding place, a proper amphitheater for tragedy.

Malcolm had waited in his room until Logan left the house. He heard a murmur of voices in the hallway and then again downstairs. After the front door had closed behind Logan, he himself went downstairs and drank two cups of black coffee. Mom made no attempt to say more than a mere "Good morning." The Professor, his round, chubby face wreathed in worry and bewilderment, looked long at Malcolm, and then shook his head as though the whole affair was far, far beyond his comprehension. Malcolm did not see Deborah or Althea.

He wore a dark suit and a white linen shirt. He was neither nervous nor afraid. He was cold, calm, and steady; he experienced none of the jumpiness which he had known occasionally before advancing under fire during the war.

He stood at the parlor window and saw Mathew D. Clayton turn into A Street and stop before the house. He put on a heavy jacket and an old felt hat and went outside to join the precise little man. He climbed into the buggy beside Clayton, and his ankle nudged the handsome case which held the pair of dueling pistols.

"They're all ready," said Clayton dryly. "I had them put in condition by a first-rate gunsmith. They've been oiled, cleaned, and loaded. The gunsmith was quite enthusiastic about them. He informed me that the trigger pull is exceedingly right."

Malcolm merely nodded. They turned down the steep declivity of Taylor Street, with Clayton keeping a tight pull on the reins. As they crossed C Street, Malcolm glanced at it with something of a nostalgic feeling. He realized with a start of surprise that he had grown fond of this crowded, narrow, boisterous thoroughfare with its buildings jammed tight against each other as though begrudging every inch. There was the office of the *Enterprise*, the California Bank, the Sawdust Corner, the Crystal, the International Hotel, the

Wells-Fargo office; the crowded dingy shops with their tiny, unattractive windows and their magnificent stocks of expensive goods. There were the usual crowds: big, burly miners; prim housewives, children, dogs, goats; two blatantly dressed girls from a D Street establishment parading leisurely through a bombardment of good-naturedly lewd remarks.

The thought struck Malcolm that he might be looking upon the scene for the last time, that the crowds, hurry, and bustle, the congestion and sense of community urgency, would go on and on and on, but that he might never again be part of it.

They dropped on down Taylor Street, past Father Manogue's church, past the grimy lodging houses, the mines, the pan mills, the dumps. He could see the big new C. & C. shaft which helped serve both the Consolidated Virginia and the California—he wondered what had happened to the decrepit little office which had marked Big Cypress—and beyond that the impressive works of the Ophir.

The air throbbed with activity. Silver and gold were being hoisted from deep down in the earth; men were digging and blasting and hauling, each intent on his own work, all intent on the incredible Big Bonanza. No one looked at the buggy in which rode two men and a pair of dueling pistols, no one knew or cared that one of the men was en route to Six-Mile Canyon where he was to shoot another man, or be shot by him.

They passed beyond the last ramshackle houses of the Chinese quarter before Clayton spoke.

"Still determined to make a damned fool of yourself, Malcolm?"

"Yes."

Clayton shook his head. "I'm glad," he said, "that I wasn't born with your type of foolhardy courage, or with your sensitivity."

They were silent for several minutes. Then Malcolm said, "You know where we're going?"

"Yes."

"You're also acting for Logan Berkeley?"

"Unless he shows up with someone else." Clayton moistened his lips, hesitated, then spoke. "Hell of a thing to ask, but have you any instructions . . . in case . . ."

"In case I'm killed?" Malcolm shook his head. "No. I've left my will, sealed, with Mom—Mrs. Carmichael. That's all."

Clayton touched the horse with his whip. "That being the case," he said, "we'd better get it over with."

A few blocks behind them a carriage followed. Brian Boru O'Mara held the reins over a spirited team. Beside him was Mom, and in the

other seat were Deborah Cortland and Althea Berkeley. The three women looked drawn and worried. Althea asked, for the dozenth time, "Do you think we can do any good, Mom?"

The older woman spoke without turning. "I don't think so. But we can try."

"Will Logan be angry?"

"Of course. Men don't usually care for audiences when they're engaged in the business of killing each other."

Althea turned to the girl at her side. "You blame me for this, don't you, Deborah?"

"No."

"You don't?" Althea was surprised. "I thought . . ."

"This, or its equivalent, had to come some day, Althea. You just happen to be the woman involved. It didn't even have to be a woman."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What difference does it make?" She spoke to the driver, "Can't we go faster, Brian?"

He nodded and urged the horses to greater speed, so that they bumped and clattered over the rocky road. "Is Mathew Clayton acting for Douglas?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mom.

"Little tarantula. I is I that hates the scum."

They rounded the base of Sugar Loaf Mountain and came to a small, level valley. There was nothing beautiful about the valley. It lay in shadow, and nothing grew in it except scrub sage which was covered with alkali dust. "Hell of a place to die," commented O'Mara. "Begging your pardon, ladies."

Mom said, "There they are," and O'Mara swung his team to the right.

"I said I'd be getting you here in time," he remarked. "I hope it's a spot of sense you'll be knocking into the heads of those two crazy men."

Logan Berkeley was waiting in the tiny valley when Malcolm and Mathew D. Clayton drove up. He waited until they had tethered their horse before tossing away his cigar and climbing down out of the rig he had hired from a livery stable.

He was dressed in his best black broadcloth suit, relic of the time when the Rattlesnake had been yielding him close to a thousand dollars a day, when he had been able to afford all the luxuries a wife might wish. He, too, wore a white shirt.

He walked toward the other men. He was carrying a package

under his arm, and he was smiling. He paused in front of them and bowed.

"Good morning, Mr. Clayton," he said. "Good morning, Malcolm."

Clayton nodded and Malcolm said, "How do you do."

Logan's eyes swept the landscape. "Not beautiful," he commented, "but the best available. Satisfactory to you, Malcolm?"

"Quite."

Clayton, looking unusually small between the two prospective duelists, spoke crisply.

"I wish to go on record as saying that I regard this whole affair as stupid and unnecessary."

"Stupid, undoubtedly," smiled Logan Berkeley, "but scarcely unnecessary."

"I am in the absurd position of acting as second for both men—"

"And also as judge."

"I am making a sincere appeal for a settlement of this disagreement. Will either of you gentlemen apologize? Will either accept an apology?"

"No," said Malcolm.

"No," said Logan.

"Then . . ." Clayton shrugged hopelessly, "I suppose there's nothing to do but proceed." He raised his eyes and saw the carriage and team. "We have visitors," he announced.

Malcolm saw them at the same instant, and his face flushed with anger. Logan followed the direction of their gaze, and he smiled with genuine amusement. "Quite a setting," he said mockingly. "The two embattled gentlemen, and the lady for whose favors they are fighting. Lovely."

Clayton said, "The pistols have been tested and loaded by a gunsmith. What procedure do you gentlemen wish to observe?"

"The usual," responded Malcolm. "Or whatever Mr. Berkeley prefers."

They were interrupted by Brian Boru O'Mara, who spoke to Malcolm and Logan, and pointedly ignored Mathew D. Clayton.

"'Tis as an emissary I've come," he said. "The ladies yonder consider this unseemly for their eyes. They request most earnestly that you gentlemen refrain from acting like bad little boys—which are the very words Mom used, and you needn't look at me that way, because I agree with her entirely—and forget this ridiculous affair."

Malcolm said, "I would suggest that they leave immediately. We will wait only a reasonable length of time."

"They'll not be leaving, Malcolm."

"Then . . ." Malcolm turned back to Logan. "I am ready," he said.

"The pistols—" began Clayton, but Logan held up his hand.

"Never mind the pistols. I've changed my mind."

Malcolm's face flushed angrily. "You mean—"

"Permit me, please." There was a mocking light in Logan's eyes, the merest quirk to the corners of his lips. "I have not changed my mind about the duel. But I prefer not to fight with pistols."

Malcolm was dazed. He said, "It was agreed . . ."

"Only by inference. I sent the dueling pistols for you to examine. Mr. Clayton will vouch for the fact that I made no definite selection of them as weapons."

Clayton nodded. "That's right enough, Mr. Berkeley. But you led me to believe—"

"As the challenged party," stated Logan suavely, "I have the choice of weapons. I have chosen these."

He opened the parcel he carried under his arm and displayed two knives. Malcolm uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"Those are mine," he said. "Two of the throwing knives I used in Professor Carmichael's show."

"Exactly. You gave them away as souvenirs. These two were given specifically to Mom and Deborah. They are, I believe, in quite excellent condition. We will use them at, shall we say, ten paces?"

A slow, hot anger was mounting in Malcolm. He said, "I refuse to fight with them."

"You cannot. I have chosen knives as weapons. We will at least share the distinction of having fought a most unique duel."

Clayton was frowning. He said: "Mr. Berkeley is right, Malcolm. You challenged him, so the choice of weapons is his. If he says you're to use throwing knives--"

"But it would be murder," snapped Malcolm. "At ten paces I can hit a dime with one of those knives. Logan doesn't even know which end of the knife to hold."

"I beg your pardon, Malcolm. I'm really quite expert in the art." Logan's eyes were dancing. "I'm quite sure," he went on, "that you will not deny me the satisfaction to which I'm entitled under the Code of Honor."

Malcolm said: "You're making a travesty of this thing, Logan. I dispute your statement about being an expert knife thrower."

"I am risking my life on it."

"You're risking nothing but my dignity. I came here to fight a duel--"

"And fight a duel you shall, Malcolm. With weapons of my choosing. I suggest that we take our places and await the signal from Mr

Clayton. Thereafter we shall have all the time we wish, until both knives have been thrown. I'm within my rights, am I not, Mr. Clayton?"

The little man was regarding Logan Berkeley with new respect, and quite some amusement. "You are," he answered. "Of course, Mr. Douglas does not have to accept your choice of weapons. He may withdraw from the meeting if he wishes."

They stood looking at Malcolm. Neither noticed that Brian Boru O'Mara had left them to return to the carriage, where the ladies were waiting, to report this newest development.

Malcolm was shaken with fury. Simply, deftly, unexpectedly, Logan Berkeley had robbed the duel of all the dignity with which it might have been endowed. He said, "I resent what you're trying to do, Logan."

"You shouldn't, Malcolm. I assure you that my intentions are most deadly, and again I insist on my rights as challenged party. Meanwhile, I am getting impatient."

He turned deliberately, and removed his coat. He looked tall and handsome and confident in his tight fitting black broadcloth trousers and white shirt. He waited, lithe figure relaxed, the maddening smile never leaving his lips.

Malcolm's gray eyes narrowed. This was more than he could, or would, take; this was the ultimate indignity. He had been forced into a position from which there was no escape. He felt a surge of fresh hatred for the suave, smiling man who had once been his friend, and a desire to kill him by whatever means. He said tightly: "Once more I'm stating that this is not fair. I cannot miss. You haven't a chance."

"We shall soon see."

"I don't know what you have in mind, Logan, but I'm warning you: I intend to kill you."

"I believe that is customary when men fight duels, is it not?"

Malcolm ripped off his coat and tossed it on the ground. He said furiously, "I'm ready."

Clayton was suddenly afraid. He had seen the change in Malcolm, had observed his resurgence of murderous anger. He hesitated, and then, because there was nothing else he could do, he extended the two knives toward Logan.

"Your choice, sir," he said.

Logan selected one of the heavy knives without looking at it. Clayton gave the other to Malcolm.

Malcolm's fingers closed about the blade. It fitted into his hand as naturally as his own palm. Without knowing that he did so, he

tested it for balance. Ten paces! He couldn't miss at that distance, practice or no practice. He couldn't miss and he wouldn't.

He had done everything any gentleman could do. He had refused to take advantage of his adversary; he had given him two opportunities to change his mind, to select pistols instead of knives. Very well: If Logan wanted knives, knives he would have.

Clayton was speaking. "You will stand back to back and walk five paces in opposite directions. You will turn. I will ask whether you are ready, and you will so signify. I will then say—and mark this, because it is different from the pistol procedure—I will then say 'Throw!' and you are at liberty to throw then or later, as you prefer. There will be no time limit. Is that clearly understood?"

They both nodded, Logan genially, Malcolm coldly.

"Very well then, gentlemen . . . Knives by your sides. They are not to be raised until I say the word 'Throw!' Now, five paces each, please."

Malcolm had himself under perfect control. He knew what he intended to do and just how he would do it.

One pace—two, three, four, five. He turned. Logan Berkeley was facing him, still smiling that thin, infuriating, mocking smile. He seemed to be having a wonderful time, to be utterly indifferent to the fact that he was at Malcolm's mercy.

Malcolm glanced at Logan's right hand, at his manner of holding the knife. It was wrong, all wrong. You couldn't throw a knife from a grip like that. Malcolm resisted an impulse to tell Logan what he was doing wrong, that if he threw the knife that way it would fly off at a tangent, would miss the target entirely, wouldn't even come close.

Clayton's thin, dry voice "Are you ready, gentlemen?"

"Ready," said Malcolm.

"Ready," said Logan.

Clayton's voice seemed farther off. "One!" he said. "Two! Three! Throw!"

Malcolm's hand flashed up. He was on the balls of his feet, tense, alert. The knife balanced perfectly.

Logan Berkeley raised his arm, too. But the gesture was awkward, the posture wrong. The man's black eyes were fixed unwaveringly on Malcolm's cold gray ones. . . .

The tableau held for five seconds, ten, fifteen. Malcolm's muscles uncoiled. He waited. . . .

Logan's smile broadened. He gave a barely perceptible shrug. He drew back his arm and tossed the knife.

It was a ridiculous throw. It went far off to the right: a calculated,

deliberate miss. Then Logan stood erect, facing Malcolm. He was calm, unblinking, patient, amused.

Malcolm's muscles tensed again. He had given Berkeley the first throw. Very well.

He took careful aim at Logan's heart. He drew back his arm, tightened his grip so that the knife was under perfect control.

Then something snapped. He threw the knife hard, straight down into the ground. It hit a bit of stone, made a thin, ringing sound, and bounced off into a clump of sagebrush.

"God damn it!" said Malcolm Douglas. "God damn it to hell!"

He turned and walked away.

LXVI

DECEMBER 12, 1874. *Althea Carmichael Berkeley vs. Logan Berkeley*, Petition for divorce. Grounds: Incompatibility. Divorce granted.

From the *Enterprise* of December 21, 1874, under the heading "Social News":

Prof & Mrs Brutus Carmichael take pleasure in announcing the forthcoming marriage of their daughter, Althea, to Mr Malcolm Douglas. The wedding will take place early next month. The charming bride and her happy bridegroom have long been residents of Virginia City, where he has extensive mining interests. Their many friends wish them long life and happiness.

Malcolm sat in his room reading and rereading the item. It was definite now, a matter of public knowledge. He went over it again, word by word, drinking in all the implications.

He felt oddly dissatisfied. Having achieved the most important goal, he found it without savor.

Logan Berkeley had moved away from the mansion on the evening of the duel. He had said goodbye to Mom and the Professor and to Deborah Cortland. What had gone on behind the closed doors of the room he shared with Althea, Malcolm could not even guess.

But Logan had left. He had been gay and debonair in his farewell to Brian Boru O'Mara. No, he said, he wasn't leaving the Comstock. He enjoyed his work at the Chollar Potosi, and he had no intention of giving it up.

Malcolm had never quite recovered from the duel. The enormity

of the indignity Logan had inflicted upon him grew as the days passed. Instead of being explosive drama, the episode had sputtered out like a damp fuse. Nor would there ever be a chance to recapture the moment or the spirit of it. There was no further thought in Malcolm's mind of a physical clash with Logan. That point had been passed, and would never be recaptured. There would be no further contact, no fury, no overwhelming desire to kill or be killed.

After all, there could be no purpose to such a procedure now. Logan possessed nothing more that Malcolm coveted. The mine which had once belonged to Logan was now bringing a fortune to Malcolm; the girl who had belonged to Logan was about to become Malcolm's wife. He had accomplished everything he had set out to accomplish.

And it was a flat, meaningless, utterly empty triumph.

Achievement—yes, Malcolm had that, but he had a feeling of futility, too. Logan had deprived him of the thing he had sought that day in Six-Mile Canyon by turning their duel into a farcical affair. Oh, he could have killed Logan—but it hadn't really been Logan's death he wanted as much as he had desired to put himself in a position of equality with Logan. That, he had not succeeded in doing.

Althea his fiancée! He wondered whether he'd be able to forget Logan when he held Althea in his arms. He had thought it would be enough to take Althea from him—but even that could not alter the fact that Logan had possessed her first. Logan was more inescapable now than ever before.

Malcolm stepped out of the house and into the thin cold air of a hoarse and early winter. He had an appointment with Mathew Clayton, and that was always a tonic. Clayton was so matter of fact, so materialistic, so profoundly certain that there could be no measurement of success other than one's accumulation of wealth.

Clayton had never referred to the fiasco in Six Mile Canyon. Never by the flicker of an eyelid had he betrayed any awareness of Malcolm's discomfiture. When they were together, they talked as practical men whose only thoughts were of finance.

And today Clayton had much to discuss. He had been working intensively, and spread out on his desk were sheets of paper covered with figures in precise, meticulous handwriting. He said, "You'll find this interesting, Malcolm."

Malcolm doffed hat and coat and seated himself beside his friend.

"One month ago," stated Mathew D. Clayton, "the aggregate value of all the mines in the Virginia City and Gold Hill districts as listed on the board of the San Francisco Stock Exchange was approximately, \$93,000,000. Today they have a market value of \$175,000,000. Forty-

nine listed mines, Malcolm, and in a period of thirty days their value has increased \$82,000,000." He shoved his chair back from the desk and turned his sharp little eyes on the younger man. "How does that strike you?"

"Ridiculous," said Malcolm.

Clayton smiled thinly. "Right," he said. "An absurd appreciation which has nothing whatever to do with intrinsic value. I hold considerable stock in several mines. I'm not telling you what to do, but I am going to sell."

Malcolm frowned. He said, "The stocks are still rising."

"The man who tries to sell at the very peak of the market is a fool," snapped Clayton. "Usually, however, he has no way of estimating the right time for letting go. This time we're more fortunate."

"How?"

"This stock frenzy was created by William Sharon and the Bonanza crowd for two reasons: first, to bring an artificial rise in the value of Ophir so that comparatively valueless stock could be sold out at enormous profit; second, to bolster Sharon's candidacy for the United States Senate by giving the impression of tremendous and permanent prosperity."

"I don't see—"

"Next month is the election. Win or lose, Sharon will have no further interest in maintaining these fantastic stock prices. Instead of continuing his buying spree to bolster the market, he'll start selling at what will amount to a considerable profit. I anticipate that he will also sell short. The market could, conceivably, crash."

Malcolm said thoughtfully: "There are times, Mathew, when I think I've learned a great deal. Then I hear a man whose judgment I value make a statement like that, and all I can see is that it makes no sense at all."

"Why not?"

"Because the value of the bonanza mines is actual. It's right there in the ground, in gold and silver, and in the hands of the stockholders in the form of dividends which are either being paid now or are about to be declared. No matter how many pieces of paper change hands, you can't alter the actual worth of Consolidated Virginia, California, Belcher, and Crown Point."

"Actual worth has nothing to do with stock prices: you should have learned that much. And we don't know the actual worth. You see, Malcolm, neither of us happens to be practical miners like John Mackay and Jim Fair. We're interested in the value of our holdings as reflected in the stock market. Or am I am I wrong?"

"You're right, of course. Just what does it mean, specifically, in my case?"

Clayton consulted his pages of figures, "You own 2,700 shares of Con. Virginia and 1,575 of California, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You can sell your holdings on the present market for a total of approximately \$2,750,000."

He leaned back in his chair, watching Malcolm through shrewd little eyes. "Or," he said, "if you wish to play safe, you can sell your Consolidated Virginia for \$1,750,000 and retain all your California stock. If you did that, you'd be independently wealthy, and when California starts paying its \$10-per-month-per-share dividend, you'd have an income of \$15,750 per month."

Malcolm studied the figures and nodded. It was difficult to convert the wealth to himself. He was accustomed to the fantastic mathematics of the Comstock, but it was not easy to realize that his personal fortune had climbed so magically. He said, "Suppose I did just that, Mathew, cashed in my Con. Virginia and held the California, where could I find a better investment?"

"I don't give business advice," responded Clayton dryly. "I can only tell you what I intend to do."

"Which is—"

"Some time within the next few months I'm going to California on an extended trip. I'm going to invest my cash in real estate. That's something permanent and tangible. I believe California is destined to grow miraculously. I intend to buy property in the San Joaquin Valley and down as far as the new city of Los Angeles. If you happen to be interested, it occurred to me that we might form a partnership." He favored Malcolm with a grim smile. "Of course, we'd draw up an agreement which would make mutual trust unnecessary, every privilege would be stipulated. I wouldn't want a partner who was fool enough to trust me."

Malcolm laughed. "You're frank enough."

"Why not? If we draw up the right sort of agreement, we'll be held to honesty. There will be no temptation for either of us to do to the other what the estimable Senator Jones and Alvinza Hayward did to Sharon and the Bank crowd. If we intend to be honest with each other anyway, then the agreement will not be a handicap."

Malcolm found Clayton's approach novel, refreshing, and thoroughly logical. He said, "Wouldn't my 2,700 shares of Con. Virginia make a dent in the market, Mathew? Wouldn't it depress prices?"

"No. You'd handle it direct with one of the big financial interests. The Bank crowd would probably buy it all, and cheerfully. Jim

Flood is in town. He's the financial man for the firm of Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien. I understand he's buying, for the firm, all the bonanza stock he can get, particularly if you're willing to sell a shade under the market. You can meet him through John Mackay. My suggestion is to tell Mackay frankly what you intend to do, and that you prefer to give his firm first chance at your block of stock. If it's an insane idea, he'll tell you quick enough. There's only one thing I want to warn you about: If you sell any or all of your stock, and if the market continues to go up, don't feel that you've been a fool. Don't do what so many better men have done before you, and rush in to buy back your own stock at higher prices than you sold for. Your problem is simple: Would you feel satisfied with \$1,750,000 cash plus the retention of all your California stock? If the answer is Yes, then your course is simple."

Malcolm said, "The answer is Yes." His eyes narrowed. "Would you be interested in buying, Mathew?"

Clayton threw back his head and laughed with genuine amusement. "A clever trap, Malcolm. The answer is that I wouldn't. I'm selling. And in any event, I'm not that kind of operator. I wouldn't sink that much cash in the whole Comstock—even if I had it to spare, which I haven't."

Malcolm said, "If I get that much money, where should I put it?"

"New York banks," stated Clayton emphatically. "I don't like the structure of the Bank of California; I don't like Ralston's methods. I'd spread it out in big Eastern banks until I got ready to invest it. Again I'll remind you that that is the course I intend to follow."

Malcolm rose and shook hands with Clayton. He went to the office of Consolidated Virginia, where he found John Mackay and Jim Fair consulting with two of their engineers. There was another man present, a big, keen-eyed man to whom Malcolm was introduced by Mackay. Instantly he liked James Clair Flood, financial genius of the firm which was already becoming known on the Comstock as the Big Four.

Malcolm explained his position to the three partners, and tensely awaited their verdict. Before he finished, Mackay was nodding approval and Flood's eyes gleamed with interest. He did some quick figuring on a bit of yellow paper.

"We will give you \$1,600,000 for your Cen. Virginia stock," he said crisply. "Right this minute."

"Done!"

"Return in an hour," said James Flood. "Bring your stock certificates. I'll have the papers drawn and the New York bank draft ready."

Malcolm said, "I'm not asking you to betray any firm secrets, but is it reasonable for me to expect that California will be put on a dividend basis soon?"

It was John Mackay who answered. He said: "Yes, Malcolm. Probably \$10 per month. I sh-sh should think your plan of holding that stock would be excellent."

Malcolm looked at the three faces. "Just one question, gentlemen: If you consider me smart to sell, why aren't you doing the same thing?"

"Because," answered Jim Fair instantly, "we don't give a damn about the stock market. We own the two biggest bonanza mines the world has ever known. We're miners, not speculators. In the long run, we'll make more out of your stock than you will, no matter what the market does. Your problem is this: Are you or are you not satisfied to be worth \$1,600,000 in cash plus your California holdings?"

Malcolm nodded. Yes, he'd be satisfied, much more than satisfied. It was wealth beyond anything he could have anticipated. Again he shook hands all round and returned to the office of Mathew D. Clayton. That afternoon the transaction was closed.

And that night, long after dinner, Malcolm and Althea sat alone in front of the fire in the garish parlor of the O'Mara mansion.

They were engaged, they were soon to be married, yet somehow he had never felt entirely at ease with her. It was only when they discussed their financial future that their minds seemed to meet.

He told her, not without pride of the deal he had made. "No matter what happens, Althea," he said, "we'll have more than \$1,500,000. It's mine now, as of this minute. When California goes on a dividend basis, we'll have \$15,000 a month to live on."

She looked at him, starry-eyed.

"I declare, Malcolm," she said, "you're the most wonderful man I've ever known. Of course I don't understand all those business details..."

He put his hand over her lips. "You're a lovely little liar, Althea. But you don't have to be fluttery and helpless with me. We'll get along better if you are your natural self."

"But Malcolm—"

"You've got the brain of an accountant," he said. "You've got a dollar sign for a heart. Let's acknowledge that."

She met his eyes levelly, and spoke calmly. "Very well," she said, her manner changing completely, "we'll acknowledge it. I am marrying you because of what you can provide, because I think you're clever enough to hold on to it. I am mercenary. I didn't waste time on you when you had no money. But there's one thing you insist on

overlooking: "Whether or not I was an admirable person, I was in love with you. I still am. Doesn't that mean anything at all?"

He said slowly: "I don't know, Althea. I'm trying to make myself believe that it does."

"You always said—" She turned to him suddenly, all woman, all fire, all rich promise. She wound her arms about his neck and pressed her mouth against his, her lips apart, her body straining against his.

"You'll see," she promised huskily. "I'll be worth a million and a half dollars to you."

LXVII

MATTHEW D. CLAYTON PROVED to be a shrewd prophet.

Through the remaining days of December, the market continued to climb, despite the closing of the San Francisco Exchange from December 24th to January 2nd. Trading was done in offices and on the street. In the early days of January the stock frenzy reached its peak.

Malcolm watched the value of Consolidated Virginia climb above the price at which he had sold, but he had schooled himself to have no regrets. The cash fortune he had amassed, plus his 1,575 shares in California, made him a wealthy and important figure. And he had the satisfaction of knowing that his wealth was tangible, not merely theoretical.

He watched the tabulated value of the thirty-one leading Comstock mines reach the fantastic figure of \$262,000,000. The market value of Consolidated Virginia alone was \$76,680,000, of California \$85,380,000, of Opfir \$31,748,000. At that time the assessed value of all the real estate in the city of San Francisco was a meager \$190,000,000.

The public had gone mad. There were no bonanza tales too wild to be given credence. Even many investors who owned bonanza stocks refused to sell at peak prices. They refused to sell out at prices that would net them profits running into the millions. With Consolidated Virginia being grabbed at \$700 per share, one of the keenest investors in San Francisco derided the price. "Sell my stock for a beggarly \$700?" he said. "I'm not a fool. It's going to \$3,000 a share."

Three thousand dollars a share: that's what people believed. They rushed in at the top of the market, believing that the upward surge

had just got under way. Even wealthy men were not content to buy stocks outright. Oh, no! They had to buy on margin; they had to hold for maximum profit, they had to reap many millions instead of just a few.

The infection spread. It swept up and down the Pacific coast and across the whole United States. Investment money poured into Virginia City and Gold Hill mines in a never ending stream. People had forgotten that there could be such a thing as value on which those prices must eventually be based. They knew of the increase of Consolidated Virginia dividends from \$3 to \$10 per month per share, of the impending \$10 California dividend. The truth, amazing and improbable as it was, was pallid and dull beside the fantasy which existed in the minds of frenzied investors.

Mathew Clayton was quietly amused. He watched the pyrotechnics of mining stocks; he observed Malcolm's reactions.

"Sorry you sold?" he asked.

Malcolm shook his head. "Not a bit," he said. "There's a satisfaction in knowing that what I've got, I've got."

"You could have made a lot more by holding on."

"I've already made more than I'll ever need."

"Glad you feel that way. Now, let's watch."

They did not have to wait long. William Sharon was elected to the United States Senate and immediately began to dump his holdings. He also commenced to sell short, knowing that basic economic principles would wreck the market if nothing else did.

It was quite simple. Since virtually all purchases had been made on margin account, there wasn't enough money in all the West to finance the purchases. Even if the Comstock mines had been worth the quoted prices, it would have been impossible to maintain such a ratio between the amount of available capital and the stock valuation. And, actually, many of the mines were—and had been for some time—hopelessly in borrasca. They had risen on the upsurge of the investment mania, and people were paying absurd prices for worthless bits of barren mining ground.

There is a top to every market, and Comstock had reached their peak. They could go no higher. There was no direction left but down.

Speculators, sensing catastrophe, commenced to unload. Prices dropped. The first touch of panic appeared. The trend, reversed, flowed swiftly. The public became alarmed, then terrified. Margins were wiped out, stocks dumped on the market. The panic was enhanced by the shrewd short-selling of daring speculators, so that not only was actual stock being sold, but the market was also flooded with offerings which were not owned by those who sold.

Down went prices, and down and down. Small investors were wiped out swiftly, then larger investors, and then many of the really great ones.

Only the Big Four, Mackay, Fair, Flood & O'Brien, were not concerned. Their Big Bonanza was growing bigger every day. At the moment of greatest decline, the production of Consolidated Virginia and California was rising to a new high level.

Mathew D. Clayton was purring like a kitten. Malcolm felt a glow of satisfaction, and a new respect for the farseeing shrewdness of his prospective partner.

A date was set. Guests were invited to attend the wedding of Althea Carmichael and Malcolm Douglas.

They were married on the twenty-first day of January, 1875.

LXVIII

IT WAS A LAVISH, expensive, beautiful and ostentatious wedding.

The entire first floor of the O'Mara mansion was a mass of fresh flowers brought by train from California. There were roses in profusion and orange blossoms and smilax and dozens of other varieties of blooms. A catering firm had been entrusted with supplying huge quantities of delicious food for the multitude which had been invited. Being a Virginia City firm, it understood that the guests would not have pygmy appetites, and enough plain and fancy food was trundled in to feed a regiment for a week. What had been planned originally as a modest collation bade fair to become a too lavish banquet.

There were innumerable cases of champagne and quantities of whisky under the direct supervision of the head bartender of the Crystal and two of his assistants. Privately, Mom had consulted with that gentleman and had exhorted him to exercise even more discretion in dispensing his wares than he would have done at his regular post of duty. Most particularly she did not wish either the Professor or Brian Boru O'Mara to become inebriated, since in the case of the former it was likely to result in a speech in which he might confuse this wedding with Althea's first and offer a toast to the wrong bridegroom; and, in the matter of O'Mara, Mom feared that trouble could conceivably break out since Malcolm had invited Mathew D. Clayton.

True, Malcolm had consulted O'Mara on that point, since the home was Brian's home and he retained certain rights. The big man

with the booming voice enthusiastically endorsed the inclusion of Clayton as a guest.

"I will be a most exhilarating experience," he assured Malcolm. "All of the great gentlemen of the Comstock will be here. They will see carved over the mantle the imperishable record of Mathew Clayton's one bit of prime dam' foolishness. Except—" He looked suddenly less gleeful, and shook his head—"except Mathew Clayton is a smart man, me boy. He will probably steal the ammunition right out of my guns."

"How?"

"It would be just like the clever little bastard to call attention to that expensive carving and to save his face by turning the laugh on himself. A memento of his younger days, he will likely proclaim, when he was neither so brainy nor so rich as at present, so that the big men of the town will be laughing *with* him and not *at* him."

Althea was to wear a white satin bridal costume. It had been created by Madame Yvette, who had been in Virginia City for less than a year but whose reputation was great and whose prices blended with bonanza times. Madame reputedly was herself a Paris import and her accent had an authentic ring, so that the ladies of Virginia City and Gold Hill if they could afford it wore her creations whether they liked them or not. A bridal bouquet had been brought up from a Carson City greenhouse by special messenger, and Malcolm heard Mom exclaiming with delight over it. It was, she told him, quite a lovely thing—delicate bride roses arranged in a shower effect with sprays of valley lilies attached individually to tiny strands of white satin ribbon.

Malcolm had made out a guest list over which he had labored diligently, since it had assumed a special importance to him. The response was gratifying, even though the lower floor of the mansion rapidly became so crowded as to make the bridal procession difficult.

John Mackay was there, of course; quiet, grave, and courteous, he gave no hint, in his modesty and shyness, that he had become the most important man on the Comstock.

Present, too, were Jim Fair, his aggressive partner, and James Clair Flood, who handled the financial matters for the firm from his San Francisco office.

Senator elect William Sharon arrived early in great state and high good humor, and shortly thereafter came United States Senator John P. Jones, who had defeated Sharon in the bitter campaign of 1872. The two Senators from Nevada shook hands cordially and said pleasant things, none of which had the slightest relation to what each was thinking.

Henry Yerington, general superintendent of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad, was in attendance, seeming somewhat surprised at discovering himself at the launching of the matrimonial bark of a young man whom he had never met but who was a warm personal friend of John Mackay's.

Present, too, were many of the superintendents of important Comstock mines: William Skyrme of Hale & Norcross, Charles M. Bonnemort of Sierra Nevada, Sam Jones of the Kentuck and Crown Point, Hank Smith of the Belcher, Isaac Requa of Chollar-Potosi, Sam Curtis of Ophir, Philip Deidesheimer, who had invented the square set used in all the mines and was the most famous engineer on the Comstock, and James Rule of the Utah.

The resident manager of Wells-Fargo attended, as did Mr. Piper who owned the Opera House. Heads of other important business firms appeared. It was a most distinctive function, and one at which there was a general spirit of cordiality and bewilderment—the former because most of the important guests knew each other, and the latter because nobody was quite sure why he had come.

Those who were married brought their wives, provided their wives were not living "down below." The ladies lent an atmosphere of distinction and French perfume, and were slightly dazed by the magnificence of everything even though their own husbands were wealthy men. Elaborate social affairs were rare in Virginia City for the simple reason that excuses for holding them were infrequent, and the good ladies had planned largely for this, avoiding no effort or expense to impress one another.

Joe Goodman came early, as did the tall, melancholy-appearing Dan De Quille and a couple of bright young men with whom Malcolm had worked on the *Enterprise*. Mathew D. Clayton, slim and small and easy and confident, walked into the parlor, joined a group of men near the fireplace, and promptly proceeded to justify Brian O'Mara's prophecy by pointing out the carving over the mantel and explaining elaborately the folly of his own youth.

Of somewhat lesser importance from a community standpoint, but of greater moment in the personal lives of the bride and groom, were Heinrich and Heide Kramer; the huge, taciturn Gus Dunbar, on whose shoulder Malcolm Douglas had returned from downtown on the night of Althea's first marriage, and Deborah Cortland.

Deborah was gay, almost too gay. She looked slim and sleek and very Eastern in a black gown which appeared simple to the men and which the women eyed enviously. The color was high in her cheeks and there was a startling brightness in the depths of her black eyes.

The ceremony was brief and simple. Althea looked lovely and

virginal in her white bridal gown. She walked in on the arm of her father, who was already happily inebriated despite Mom's vigilance. Her eyes were demurely downcast, and no one, except possibly Malcolm, Mom, and Deborah Cortland, could have suspected that she regarded the ceremony as her assumption of the rights to half of a great fortune.

Only Malcolm seemed ill at ease. Althea's beauty dazzled him, the realization that she was in the process of being legally delivered over to him was exciting, the promise of matrimonial delights in the very immediate future had its natural appeal, yet the situation felt somewhat short of perfection.

He avoided Deborah until after the ceremony, until Althea, by a few magic words, had become Mrs. Malcolm Douglas instead of Miss Althea Carmichael or Miss Logan Berkeley. It was in the midst of congratulations that Deborah edged through the press of people and kissed Althea. "Congratulations," she said heartily, and Althea thanked her, though somewhat uncertainly.

Deborah turned to look straight into Malcolm's eyes. If she observed in them the faintest cloud of doubt, she gave no sign. She put both her hands in his.

"Congratulations," she said again. And then somewhat cryptically, "You're very lucky, Malcolm."

He flushed, thanked her, and turned gratefully to accept the congratulations of Mr. and Mrs. Fair, who had edged to the forefront of the crowd. There were others and others, and then felicitations afforded Malcolm the happy chance to turn his back on Deborah and to appear to forget about her.

Deborah eased back through the mass of people. Near the rose bower under which Malcolm and Althea had been married, she encountered Mom. The two women looked at each other with mutual affection and esteem.

"I'm going out," announced Deborah.

"Whither?"

"I think," she said quietly, "that I'd like to have a drink with Logan. It seems that he and I are entitled to a very special kind of celebration."

Mom put her hand gently on the girl's arm. "I'd like to join you," she said softly. "I'd get drunk as an owl."

Gus Dunbar plowed through the snow to a livery stable on B Street and returned a few minutes later with a carriage and team. Deborah climbed in beside him, and they started out on their search for Logan Berkeley.

He was not at his lodging house, nor was he at the Chollar-Potosi office. They made the rounds on C Street with Deborah sitting in the carriage while Gus checked each of the likely spots. They found him finally in the bar of the International, and Deborah thanked Gus and sent him back to the livery stable with the team and the assurance that she wouldn't need him any more that night.

Logan saw her in the mirror. He rose quickly, bowed, and held out his hand. "A most happy chance," he said.

"Not an accident," she corrected. "I've been hunting for you this past hour. If you'll escort me to that corner table, we'll have a drink and cry on each other's shoulders."

Gravely and courteously he escorted her across the room, held a chair for her, helped her remove her coat, seated himself opposite, and beckoned a waiter. He ordered two whiskies and neither spoke until the drinks were served. Logan raised his glass gravely and said, "A toast to the bride and groom."

She touched his glass with hers. And then she said, "And now a toast to the ex-groom and the would-be bride."

They drank again. He raised his hand to summon the waiter again, but she stopped him. "That would be carrying things too far, Logan," she said. "The night you married Althea, I watched Malcolm get drunk. Let's make this different."

The thin, sardonic smile appeared on his lips, the old saber scar stood out vividly.

"A perfect ceremony, I presume, Deborah?"

"Beautiful. I got out just before smothering in the sweetness of it."

"Althea looked lovely?"

"And she. You would have been proud of her."

"Naturally. Any wife of Logan Berkeley's knows how to conduct herself when she's being married. It's a matter of Southern training. Keep the old flag flying even though the cause is lost. Surrender if you must, but never without a bridal veil."

The waiter appeared and Logan ordered two fresh drinks, but they remained untasted on the table before them.

Deborah leaned across the table and said: "Tell me about Big Cypress, Logan. Tell me about some thing gentle and tranquil and clean and three thousand miles away from Virginia City."

He nodded understandingly. "It was very lovely before the war, Deborah. You'd have liked it. There would have been nothing for you to draw or paint, because you cannot transfer tranquillity to canvas. Not you, at any rate. There was nothing hectic at home—a man riding a blooded horse, perhaps, gentle women doing gentle things, the slaves working by day in the cotton fields and singing at night,

sluggish rivers moving slowly between banks heavy with cypress and black gum and water oaks; gray moss festooned from broad, spreading branches; jonquils and jasmine and azaleas and honeysuckle in the spring; not a vein of ore, no gold, no silver, no stock certificates, no dirt, no selfishness, no grasping at the property of another man. . . ."

She felt a constriction in her throat. This was the second time she had touched the unsuspected depths of Logan Berkeley.

"Are you going back?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Oh! I suppose the bad times are about ended. Perhaps I could again own Big Cypress. But I'd only own the land. The things that made it Big Cypress have vanished. They'll never return." He looked straight at her. "And you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know what I'll do, Logan. For a while, at least, I'm staying here."

"Why?"

"Perhaps a woman loves to suffer."

"Perhaps a woman loves."

"Perhaps." She forced a smile. "We mustn't get sorry for our selves, Logan Berkeley. We must accept our defeats gallantly."

"How? By sitting here sharing our misery? By blotting it out with whisky so that it comes back to us twice as poignantly tomorrow?"

She said, "No-o. I have an interesting and shocking suggestion. I think it would be fitting if you and I spent Althea's second bridal night together."

His face flushed and he spread his hands on the table. "You shouldn't say such things, Deborah."

"Why not? I'm serious. Why should we be alone for the rest of this night? You know—" there was bitterness in her voice—"this is the second time in recent weeks that I have offered my virginity to a man. The first time was the night before you and Muldoon were to fight your duel. I went to his room—"

"And he, being a thorough gentleman, refused to deprive you of your most precious jewel."

"Yes. But not for the reason you think. He was afraid."

"Of what?"

"His conscience. Had he ruined me that night, he would have felt obligated to make an honest woman of me. And I would have let him. I happen to love him."

"As I love Althea."

"Precisely. Except with this difference. You enjoyed several years of fulfillment. I have never had that pleasure—or is it a pleasure?"

"It is," he said gravely. "But not under these circumstances."

She deliberately overemphasized her words: "So I've been spurned again"

"You certainly have. Do you want to know why?"

"I'm sure I'd love to hear"

"Because nothing would happen. We'd spend the night weeping in each other's arms."

"That would still be better than nothing"

"But not much better." He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "Perhaps neither of us has lost anything."

"No use, Logan. Being a lady, I can't say it, but I still feel like hell. And that's why I offered myself to you. Because I don't care to go back to the mansion to well, knowing that."

Her lips were smiling, but there was anguish in her eyes. He tried to bolster her spirits. "We could climb Mount Davidson and freeze together in the snow."

"Not very attractive."

"We could visit a gambling house and lose our money."

"Women not allowed. And I am a woman whether or not any man is willing to prove it."

"We might stand outside the mansion and serenade the bridal couple."

She stood up suddenly and held out her hand. "Take me home, will you, Logan?" "I'm being a fool. I'm about to prove I'm a woman." She started walking toward the lobby and he followed.

"I'm afraid I'm about to start crying," she said.

The wedding guests had gone. The Professor had been tucked into bed, gloriously drunk. Mona sat in her rocker looking at nothing, trying to keep her mind blank.

She and the caterers had straightened up the worst of the post-reception shambles. In the morning the effect would be rather appalling: debris, wilted flowers, dead orange blossoms, inconsolable roses. The prospect of a hard day's work, she did not displease her.

In the big corner room across the hall (with unexpected delicacy Althea had suggested that it might be better for them not to use the same room in which she had slept so ~~so~~ effectively with Logan), the bride and groom were preparing, somewhat awkwardly, for the inevitable aftermath.

Both were shy. Althea because she did not wish to seem eager or upbraidingly or too well-versed in the usual. Malcolm because he could not quite rid himself of the depressing thought that there were three people in the room.

It was Althea who eventually led the way. She disappeared behind

a screen, and when she emerged a few minutes later it was in a sheer nightgown. Her lovely blond hair was down over her shoulders, and she kept her eyes averted as she crept into the big, canopied bed and turned on her side.

Malcolm commenced to undress, chiefly because there was nothing else for him to do. He was strangely nervous and ill at ease. Fulfillment was at hand, and it had a frightening aspect.

He tried to hark back several years, before Logan had intruded into Althea's life, back to the days when he, Malcolm, had desired this moment as he had desired few other things. But his mind was not disciplined. He wondered how closely this routine duplicated Althea's first night with Logan, he wondered whether his awkwardness might not prove a depressing contrast to Logan's sophistication. Yes, he was sure Logan would have been suave, even under such circumstances. He wouldn't have stood about like a lout, knowing what was supposed to happen next, wanting it and dreading it.

Malcolm disrobed slowly, trying to keep himself under control. He turned out the light and slipped into bed, lying rigidly beside his wife, not touching her.

For a long time they lay that way. Then because his embarrassment seemed to denote a certain ineptitude, he put out his left hand and it came to rest on Althea's thigh. A hot flush suffused him and much of his reticence disappeared. He turned and swept her into his arms. Her body was firm and warm and eager against his, and he heard her saying, "Oh, Malcolm, Malcolm, Malcolm."

For a few superb minutes Logan Berkeley was forgotten, all the rest of the world was forgotten. He held her hungrily, as though he could never have enough of her. He took her, and her response amazed and delighted him. She met his fumbling advances with a duct frenzy of passion, so that his restraint vanished.

And afterward they lay locked in each other's arms, and their world was encompassed by the four walls of that room. Eventually they slept, and when he opened his eyes to the morning light Malcolm realized that Althea was still beside him, that she was his wife—now and forever.

LXIX

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING of his life as a married man, Malcolm Douglas acquired a sense of completion.

The physical side of their marriage gave promise of becoming a perpetual delight. The mental side was equally interesting.

They went walking in the clear crisp cold of the wintry days. She was gay and bright, and he found himself laughing more than he had ever laughed before. In the intimacy of their room, she delighted to shock him, as though engaged in a calculated effort to draw him out of himself. He found her roguish, tantalizing, and unexpectedly exciting. And often they lay awake until well into the morning, bodies warm and close against each other, talking with that utter lack of restraint which can come only to a man and a woman who are congenial and who have made the most of their opportunity for physical satisfaction.

She was enthusiastic about his plan for a prolonged journey through California to study conditions, with the idea of eventually going into partnership with Mathew D. Clayton and investing his money in land. They agreed that they'd had enough of the Comstock, that continued investment in mining stocks was too risky. Now, land was different, especially if you believed that California was destined to grow into a great and prosperous State.

Together, and sometimes in the company of Mathew Clayton, they did a good deal of studying. They planned to spend the balance of the winter in Virginia City and then make their trip West in the spring, in April, when the San Joaquin Valley was a mass of color and beauty. Even a brief escape from the harshness of the Comstock would be a relief.

Malcolm had made a slight change in his financial plans. California had split its stock again, this time on a five-for-one basis, so that Malcolm's 1,575 shares had grown to 7,875. James Flood stated that he had advised the split on the ground that by multiplying the number of shares the general public would be given greater opportunity to share in the bonanza. The argument was somewhat specious, but the split was made nevertheless, and those with money to invest ever unmindful of the beatings they had taken in the past—commenced to buy stock in California, generating a slow, healthy rise from the low levels to which it had descended after the crash of January.

However, no dividend had yet been declared. John Mackay informed Malcolm that they might not take this step for a year or so, since they were doing considerable expensive drifting at the lower levels, and production would not be permitted to take its head until profitable results were assured. The dividend was planned on a basis of \$2 per share instead of the originally conceived \$10, but it amounted to the same thing because each share had now become five

Malcolm sold 8,150 shares of his stock at an excellent price. "That," he explained to Althea, "leaves us with 5,000 shares. When they start their \$2 dividend, we'll have an income of \$10,000 per month . . . and we already have more than \$2,000,000 snug and safe in New York banks."

Althea said, "Is it true that there's trouble in the Bank of California, darling?"

"I think so. Mathew tells me that Ralston has overreached himself and that when the Ophir failed to strike a new bonanza the entire structure was weakened."

"Isn't John Mackay planning to open a bank of his own?"

"The firm, yes, not Mackay individually. But I don't know," Malcolm shook his head. "John has always said he is a miner, not a financier. I think I'd rather entrust my finances to old, established banks."

She smiled radiantly. "I declare, Malcolm, I've got the smartest husband. You just know everything."

His gray eyes sparkled with amusement. "You're a complete fraud, Althea. You know as much about financial matters as I do."

"Why, Malcolm! What a terrible thing to say!"

"It's not terrible, it's flattering. I wouldn't have you otherwise. It makes us partners."

"I hope you'll never do with any other partners what you do with me!"

He flushed, then laughed. She was playing her favorite game of teasing him, shocking him. "I shan't ever want to," he pronounced. He seated himself and drew her down on his lap. "Happy?" he asked.

"Deliriously."

"Life look bright?"

"Wonderful."

"Anything you want? New clothes, new carriage, new house, new jewelry?"

"My goodness, no, darling. You've already given me more than any woman has a right to ask."

She encouraged Malcolm to go out to mix with men, to assume his proper role as an important person in the community. He was elected to the White Club and occasionally participated in their poker games, which were played for fantastically high stakes. He played a cold, shrewd, canny game but not a reckless one. His fear of losing a considerable amount kept him from ever making a big winning.

Actually, he had no heart for gambling. To him, it was an absurd risking of money that had been difficult to come by. To men like Mackay and Fair and even Sharon, it was still a game. Their personal fortunes were piling up at unspendable rate.

It was gratifying to be a member of the Washoe Club, it was good to walk down C Street and be greeted respectfully by men and women he did not even know. Of course, he didn't delude himself: he knew that the respect was not being extended to Malcolm Douglas but to the \$2,000,000 which Malcolm Douglas possessed. He was amused by the fanciful rumors of his own worth. He was reputed to possess eight million, ten, twelve. He didn't trouble to discount the rumors because they helped to build his prestige, helped to give him the importance which could never have been his in South Carolina . . . which could never have been his, in fact, anywhere except on the Comstock, where the sole measurement of a man was his bank account.

He was greeted respectfully in the bars and at any mining office into which he happened to wander. People, knowing his intimacy with John Mackay, though never knowing how it had started, cultivated his acquaintance hoping to get a little inside information about the long range prospects of the Big Bonanza mines.

His life was almost perfect. Almost, but not quite. He wished that Deborah Cortland would leave the mansion, the Comstock, the West, even. He saw her every day, certainly at lunch and dinner, and often between times. She made him uncomfortable.

She had a way of regarding him from under her long black lashes, as though she knew things about him that even he did not know. He recalled all too vividly the night before the ill starred duel with Logan Berkeley when she had visited his room. He admired her clear, clean brain and her insight and yet it disturbed him. She was like a mirror of his own conscience, causing him to doubt himself at times when his every conscious effort was toward establishing self confidence. She punctured his ego before it ever had a chance fully to inflate. Yet she was never critical, never sarcastic.

He knew that she was seeing a good deal of Logan Berkeley, and that had an unpleasant effect on him. No, of course, he didn't care what Deborah did. It was no concern of his. But he was fond of her, they had been friends, they might under other circumstances have been a good deal more than that. And it seemed that even with so tenuous a relationship, Logan was responsible.

He wondered what Deborah and Logan talked about, whether they discussed him, and if so, what they said. There were times when Deborah's glance said that she was sorry for him, at other times she seemed merely amused.

The one thing that Malcolm Douglas did not know about Deborah Cortland was that she was still in love with him.

Malcolm and Clayton drew up partnership articles which were on the classic side in their precautions against sharp practice by either

partner. They laughed a good deal about the various clauses, but neither offered to delete a single one of them.

They planned to leave the Coihstok in April. It was to be a belated honeymoon, and, for Malcolm, the first trip he'd ever taken in which money would not be a constricting factor.

He promised Althea that during their stay in San Francisco she should have an orgy of shopping. She was to buy the most elaborate wardrobe imaginable. They were to stay at the finest hotel, in a lavish suite. For once they would squander money for the sheer fun of spending it.

Clayton was understanding and tolerant. Nor was he worried about Malcolm. That young man, Clayton believed, had a head which would never be anything other than level. Now that he had rid himself of restricting scruples, he'd make a perfect partner: young, enthusiastic, canny, and steady.

John Mackay came to Malcolm one day with a very special offer. Henry Yerington, general superintendent of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad, who had been a guest at Malcolm's wedding, was offering the use of a private car for the trip from Virginia City to San Francisco.

A private car. Somehow, that seemed an ultimate achievement. Malcolm accepted, trying to conceal his delight.

They planned and prepared for the trip.

And one week before they were to leave, Althea told Malcolm that she was pregnant. Yes, she was sure. She had suspected it for some time, and had waited until there was no possibility of mistake.

He gathered her in his arms and held her close. A child, his child. A son, perhaps. Fulfillment.

It was indeed a cause for rejoicing. It meant even more to Malcolm than the private car.

LXX

THE CROWD AT THE Virginia & Truckee station buzzed with conjecture as the Douglas party walked to the lower end of the passenger platform and boarded the private car.

Malcolm tried to look impassive, as though such luxury were the most natural thing in the world. He pretended that he had not heard, a stranger ask, "Who is that?" and someone else answer "That's

Malcolm Douglas. He came here broke a few years ago and cleaned up millions."

Everything was perfect for this moment of his triumph. Henry Yerington himself was present to see that everything possible had been done for the comfort of Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Douglas and their guest Mathew D. Clayton. Present, too, were John W. Mackay and Mr. and Mrs. James G. Fair. Dan De Quille was there, bemoaning the fact that he'd become a society reporter in behalf of his former co-worker in the field of journalism, and actually bursting with unselfish pride over Malcolm's acknowledged prominence.

Professor Carmichael was here, there and everywhere, pudgy and important and striving to impress everybody with the fact that he was the father in law of this brilliant young man. Mom was present, too, placid as usual, yet oddly impressed by such magnificence.

At her first glimpse of the interior of the private car, Althea clasped her hands in ecstasy. "I do declare, Malcolm," she exclaimed, "it's just about the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my whole life," and he smiled and shrugged as though to tell her that it was a mere beginning.

The rear end of the car was furnished like the living room of a small home: there were heavy comfortable plush chairs, shiny brass finishing ~~quite~~ ^{white} woodwork. There was a table which was piled high with going away gifts, candy and fruit and books and delicacies from the better stores on C Street. There was an astonishingly cozy bedroom for Mr. and Mrs. Douglas, and a smaller room for Mathew Clayton. There was an obsequious steward who stood grinning in the passageway, eager to anticipate the slightest wish of Mr. Yerington's guests.

The gleaming locomotive which was to haul the train backed into it with a bump. Mom kissed Althea and Malcolm then took the Professor's hand and led him to the platform before he could raid the well-stocked liquor cabinet. Yerington and Mackay, the Fairs and Dan De Quille, all shook hands with the travelers, and followed Mom and the Professor outside.

Malcolm and Althea and Mathew Clayton opened the door and stationed themselves on the observation platform. The others had gathered just below them, and now there was a last minute clatter of advice, reminder, and good-natured chaffing.

Up ahead a station porter was rolling a hand truck toward the baggage car. The ordinary passengers who were to make the journey in the coaches crowded to the windows. The engineer and firemen poked their heads out of the cab to see that everything was in order, and the conductor strutted importantly up and down the platform.

for a last minute inspection and also to impress the general superintendent with his own efficiency.

Malcolm wore a fixed, pleasant smile. He answered casual questions directed at him from the platform, but he was thinking of himself, of what he had accomplished in six and a half years, of the manner of his coming and of the manner of his leaving.

For the first time in his life he was experiencing a sensation of utter contentment. This was it. Beyond this there could be no moment holding more of triumph, of satisfaction, of accomplishment.

From the observation platform he could see the towering bulk of Mount Davidson, already casting its early afternoon shadow across the length and breadth of Virginia City. All about him were the mines, the mills, the dumps, the hoisting works. He heard, as though for the first time, the throb of engines, the shrill scream of whistles at the hoisting works, the braying of the Washoe canaries, the hoarse, good-natured ribaldry of the miners.

Above the station stretched the business and residential sections of the city, crowded, congested, humming with activity. He could see the Lower Town with its less pretentious edifices, and far off he glimpsed the hills and the mountains and the ravines which gave to the Comstock its ugliness, its grandeur, and its regal isolation.

His mind went back to that afternoon of late summer when a wagon train had paused at the top of the pass and he had seen Virginia City for the first time. He had been insignificant then, an inconsequential performer in an inconsequential medicine show, a bewildered and embittered young man who was entering into a new world, a new way of life, unsure of his capabilities, uncertain of what the future might hold.

No one had known him then; no one had asked who he was, nor had anyone cared. He had come to the Comstock as a poorly paid performer because he could not afford to come any other way. He had remained for more than six years, and he was leaving now as a man of importance. It was a far cry from the banging, creaking, canvas-covered wagon to the superlative luxury of a private railroad car.

He remembered the final stages of the journey into Virginia City when he and Althea had sat on little canvas stools in the back of the wagon, young, optimistic, and uncertain, and he recalled Althea's remark: "It's all wrong, Malcolm. We can only look backward. We ought to be looking ahead."

Well, he could look backward now, and with pride. The young man who had entered Virginia City with a few silver coins in his pocket was leaving with \$2,000,000 safely tucked away in conserva-

nive Eastern banks, and with a sizable stake in a bonanza mine; the young man whose whole pattern of living had been disrupted by civil war had reweoven the fabric of his life so that he controlled his own future.

He had been soft then—not physically, but emotionally—handicapped by the delicate niceties of right and wrong, honor and dishonor.

That had changed. Not swiftly. Just a little at a time. He had developed a new and stern philosophy based on the theory of the survival of the fittest. The only error one might commit on the Comstock was to fail, and he had not failed.

Looking back on it, from his eminence as guest of honor in a private car, as a man of wealth and importance, he could see the pattern, the slow but inevitable progress in the chosen direction—the acquisition of those sterner qualities which one must possess in order to succeed, the willingness to compromise ethically until, gradually, ethics appeared to be merely an excuse for the failure of men of lesser caliber.

The six years which had elapsed since that jolting wagon journey across the Sierras to this fabulous land had taken a steady trend, a definite movement toward this hour of triumph.

Element of luck had played a strong part, but Malcolm knew that it hadn't been all luck. It hadn't been luck that he had remained to fight his battle in Virginia City after it became apparent that he was not to receive what he then conceived to be his rightful share of the Rattlesnake mine, after he had lost the girl he loved.

It hadn't been luck that he had possessed the courage and ability to save the life of John W. Mackay and thus perhaps change the history of the Comstock as well as his personal history. It hadn't been luck that he had estimated correctly the shrewdness of Mathew Clayton, or that he had possessed the courage to hold on to his bonanza shares in the early days of the stock frenzy when it had seemed that they could go no higher. It hadn't entirely been luck that he had sold not quite at the peak of the market but very near to the peak—and that he had resisted the temptation to join as others had erred by reinvesting in Comstock shares until some of the inevitable crashes should wipe him out.

It had not been luck that he had had the fortune to continue as part of the family in which the girl he loved was the wife of a man he hated, it had therefore not been luck that he was on hand when that man's fortunes had reached low ebb.

It was an odd thing, this conception of luck. Every man had it: good luck and bad. The weakling permitted ill luck to wreck him;

the strong man accepted the bad breaks and waited patiently for the good ones, having the keenness to recognize them when they came, and to exploit them to the fullest.

So much had happened to Malcolm in so small a world. He had known his own measure of heartbreak; he had made strange friends. He had undertaken the new profession of journalism and had acquitted himself well. He had fought injustice with the most effective weapons and thereby had saved the life of Manny Hirsch, who was now probably playing banjo with some traveling show—but with a wife who adored him.

Malcolm did not realize that the others had returned to the warmth of the car, leaving him alone on the platform. He did not hear the rising wrath of the wind, the beginning of the last Washoe zephyr he was to experience for some time. He did not feel the cold because he was glowing with inner warmth.

He had worked, he had been patient, he had been as ruthless as the Comstock demanded. He had fitted himself into a world where only the hardy could survive . . . and he had triumphed.

He had money and position and influential friends; he had a bright future, he had a wife who seemed to be more lovely and more desirable each day; and he was soon to be the father of her child. He had fought the world on its own terms, and he had won.

Three sharp blasts sounded from the locomotive. The conductor bellowed an imperious, "Aaaaall aboooooooooard!" and the train began to move, slowly, slowly . . . oh, very slowly.

Malcolm raised his eyes for a last quick look at the city he had conquered. It was then that he saw them.

They were standing under the train shed near the freight warehouse. They were looking straight at him.

Logan Berkeley was dressed in his customary rough miner's garb, yet it sat gracefully on his tall, lean figure. Even at that distance, Malcolm could see the little smile beneath the small black mustache the sabbet cut along the line of the jaw. He could see the ease and confidence of a man who had never compromised, who had accepted a succession of misfortunes with inimitable graciousness, who had taken pride in being a wealthy mineowner and who took equal pride at being an assistant foreman of another man's mine. He saw a man who had lost the estate to which he had been born and also the estate he had earned—and yet who seemed to be at peace with himself if for no other reason than that he had not betrayed his heritage.

And the girl with him, Deborah Corfield. The train was moving, but Malcolm's eyes seemed to draw her to him, so that her face was no longer distant, but close and intimate and real.

Malcolm experienced a sense of shock. In that instant he saw clearly, and understood too well. He was moving away from the woman he might truly have loved, who might truly have loved him. He had been carried away by an obsession which had distorted his perspective so that revenge had appeared to be the only thing worth while, an obsession which had culminated in his marriage to Althea—not because she was Althea, not because she was the girl with whom he had once fancied himself in love—but because she had belonged to Logan Berkeley.

The train rounded a curve, and Malcolm's last view of Virginia City was not of the narrow, rutty streets or of the mines and mills, but of the man who might have been his friend and was not, of the woman who might have been his wife and now never could be.

He opened the door and entered the luxurious lounge of the private car. Althea and Mathew Clayton were seated side by side. No question that Althea was enjoying herself. Her eyes were sparkling, her laughter was spontaneous, and there seemed little doubt that she would fit readily into this new way of life.

Malcolm seated himself opposite and shook his head smilingly at their invitation to join in the conversation. He settled into the luxurious upholstery of the movable chair in the private car, still finding it difficult to accustom himself to such extraordinary grandeur.

The sun had dropped behind the towering peaks of the Washoe Range, and the land was in shadow. A chill crept down the mountainside and seemed to penetrate the closed windows of the car. Althea and Clayton did not appear to be aware of it; Althea's eyes were sparkling, and Clayton seemed vastly amused by whatever it was she was saying.

Malcolm was vaguely disturbed—not by anything tangible, but by something that welled within him and cast a shadow across the path that stretched ahead. It was vague and formless, and he was annoyed because the reason for his abrupt mood of depression was not apparent to him.

He had lost his sense of absolute achievement, of complete satisfaction. Whereas, just a few minutes previously, he had felt that he held in the palm of his hand everything he had ever wanted, his sense of contentment had vanished, leaving a hollowness.

He had been certain of himself, certain of his triumph, proud of his accomplishment and of his new position in life. Then he had caught a brief glimpse of Deborah Cortland and Logan Berkeley and his feeling of exaltation had faded.

He was annoyed with himself. He resented anything which de

tracted from the perfection of the moment, anything which implanted the faintest vestige of doubt. Hadn't he done everything he had hoped to do? He was no longer the callow young man who had ridden uncertainly into a strange land. He was a person of importance, a man who was pointed out by strangers as someone worth noticing, he was married to the girl he had always wanted to marry, and he had acquired all the wealth and position which once had belonged to Logan Berkeley.

But he wasn't happy. Something was lacking. He felt that Deborah's eyes were peering in at him from the bleak and rugged countryside, questioning, probing, compelling him to question himself, to understand this new and troublesome thought which already had dulled the edge of his self-satisfaction.

Happy? Of course he was happy. What more could he ask of life? Nothing was lacking—nothing. He glanced across the aisle at his wife. Young and lovely and gay and practical. He thought with pride of her pregnancy, of the fact that before long—perhaps before they returned to the Comstock—she would be the mother of his child.

But the glimpse of Deborah and Logan on the station platform had done things to him, disturbing things, unfair things. Even though they had long since passed from view, the stature became greater than all the mountains which closed in about the train, their eyes followed him through the ravines as though peering into his soul, their personalities enveloped him to the point of suffocation.

He felt anger and resentment. Why should they follow him? Why should they intrude so insistently on his thoughts, tarnishing the brilliance of his achievement? Damn it! Didn't they realize who he was, what he had accomplished?

Wealth, position, a young and pretty wife, friends, power—it all added up to perfection, yet as of this moment it was not perfect. "I'm in bonanza," he told himself over and over again, as though by repetition he could convince himself.

Yes, he was in bonanza. Bonanza was the attainment of all material ambitions. That was his bonanza. That was why hard, sound, inexorable logic told him that he was happy, and yet did not convince him. Because—and essentially he faced the fact with grim courage—he was not happy, his heart ignored the instruction of his head that he should be content.

With some bewilderment he acknowledged that his personal triumph fell short of bonanza. He was reminded of the pyrites deep in the bonanza mines, the metal that you believed was gold until you learned that it was not gold, that it was without value.

Could it be possible that his triumph was to prove less than ade-

quate? Could it be that in his relentless pursuit of certain material ends he had by-passed the real bonanza?

Malcolm Douglas dared not evade the personal issue. He felt that he must understand himself, must find an answer to the discontent which suffused him and made a sham of what he had until an hour ago regarded as complete fulfillment.

What he had achieved was neatly catalogued. To define what he had lost in the process was not so simple. But once he acknowledged that there had been a loss, the picture became clearer.

He had lost a friend. He had lost a woman who might well have meant more to him than Althea ever could.

And he had, somewhere along the way, lost himself.

"Materially, I'm in bonanza," he told himself bitterly. "Spiritually and emotionally, I'm in borrasca."

He felt that the acknowledgment was shameful, but he knew it was honest. He knew, too, that the certainty that he had squandered a vital part of himself in his quest for success, that he had mistaken the surface for the substance, was something from which he would never escape. Yet he told himself fiercely that he must escape. There must be, he felt, a compensation somewhere.

He needed something to cling to, something to alleviate his new bitterness. Althea was not, and never could be, Deborah. But Althea was his and Deborah was not.

Clayton could never give him what Logan could have given. Yet he had elected to link his future with that of the thin, dry, shrewd little man whose counsel had been of such value.

The whistle of the locomotive sounded mournfully, echoing back from the mountains. The train rolled and rattled and clanked as it ground on and on toward a future which suddenly and disturbingly had become less brilliant, less perfect.

He looked at Althea again. She caught his glance and flashed him a quick warm smile.

Before long, he reflected, she would bear his child. He shook off the mood of depression which had been born of his self analysis, and his thoughts turned again to the future.

His child, and probably, in due course, other children. Well, he would have something to give to his children and to the children that they would some day have. He would bequeath to them wealth and position and all the pride that went with it.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, erasing the memory of Deborah and of Logan, thinking of the generations to come after him.

His children and his grandchildren would find themselves in an

enviable position. They would know from whom their wealth and power stemmed. They would listen to tales of their father, their grandfather, stories which would assume greater lustre and gallantry with each telling, stories of how he had gone to the Comstock with a cheap theatrical troupe, possessing nothing but courage and unquenchable ambition, of how he had left there six years later a man of wealth and importance.

That was a sort of thing children would repeat with pride. They would be reared in luxury, but they would know that he had created that luxury. The very humbleness of his origin would make his achievement more spectacular as the years went by. He would become a legendary figure in the minds of generations yet unborn.

The warmth commenced to course again through Malcolm's body. As many days as he remained in borrasca now, just that many days—that many years and perhaps decades—he would be in bonanza. Those who came after him would glory in their heritage.

He nodded imperceptibly, not knowing that he did so. He had faced himself fairly and with courage. He realized for the first time the full measure of what he had earned, and it was no less pleasant because he sensed that it was the only true inward satisfaction he would ever know.

It could be expressed simply, but simplicity could not lessen its magnitude.

He, Malcolm Douglas, son of an overseer, had earned the privilege of becoming an ancestor.